

# Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

Vol. 60 No. 4 2016





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Bandwagon: The Journal of the  
Circus Historical Society (USPS  
406-390) (ISSN 0005-4968) is  
published quarterly by the  
Circus Historical Society for its  
members. © 2016.

## Office of Publication

1075 West Fifth Avenue,  
Columbus OH 43212.  
Periodical postage paid at  
Columbus OH and additional  
entry offices. Postmaster:  
send all address changes to  
Bandwagon: The Journal of the  
Circus Historical Society, 1075  
Fifth Avenue, Columbus OH  
43212.

## Membership Rate

Circus Historical Society  
membership is \$60.00  
annually in the United States,  
\$80.00 annually in Canada,  
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information are available on  
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articles from earlier issues  
is available online at [www.circushistory.org](http://www.circushistory.org). Back issues  
are available from the Office of  
Publication.

# Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

2016 Volume 60, Number 4

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# Circus Historical Society

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*"To preserve, promote, and share  
through education the history and  
cultural significance of the circus and  
allied arts, past and present."*

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## A note from the guest editor

Someone recently asked me, "What's the most exciting thing you have in your circus collection?" I believe the person asking was thinking that I would mention one item like a poster, a letter, a photograph or a ledger. My response was measured but firm. "It's the stories."

Bloomington and Normal, Illinois enjoy a rich circus history grounded in (perhaps unexpectedly) the air. The barns, the local YMCA, and the space available here for putting up rigging fostered dreams of circus stardom for many. In fact, when the idea of this issue was first brought to me, I started a list of circus people I knew who once called this area home. That list quickly grew to 40, then 50, then more. Names like W. E. Franklin (there's a Franklin Park in town), Charles & Ada Smith, and of course, Art Concello were there, along with luminaries like Pawnee Bill, Erma Ward, China & Dorothy Durbin, and the Valentines.

These last four – known locally as Gordon Lillie, Erma Hubbell, Carl and Dorothy Durbin and the Valentine brothers, George, Bill, Fred, and Roy – are the subject of four articles you will find in the following pages. The fifth article is one about a place so pivotal to so many, the Bloomington YMCA. Our local Y helped to create flyers like Tuffy Genders, Wayne Larey, and Art Concello and was an annual showplace for professional performers who also called this area home like The Flying Wards, Gene and Mary Enos, and Dick Clemens.

These stories will, I hope, delight you. Better still, maybe some of the names seen within this issue will lead you to dig a little deeper to learn their stories. If so, please consider writing up what you learn for this periodical meant to capture the history of the magnificent cultural phenomenon known as circus.

"It's the stories," after all!

"Watch it, Auntie!"

Maureen Brunsdale



# About the covers

by Maureen Brunsdale

Trunks. Those big heavy things sit – often tucked away in attics or garages. Sometimes they sit quietly forgotten for decades. The only certain thing about the trunks is that they were once used to transport things. Imagination kicks in after the questions start: Who owned the trunk? When was it purchased? What's in it? Where has it been?

The same questions come to mind with the Taylor trunks used by circus personnel, but there are more of them, including, what act? Which circuses?

The photos on the front and back cover come from trunks held in the vault of Special Collections, Milner Library, Illinois State University. The DeVards trunk seen on the front cover came from that place which helped produce and finish many aerialists, the Ward Barn (later owned by Art Concello). While the Barn was demolished in the late 1960s, the trunk didn't come to us until recently. The donor, Fred Wollrab, was telling me about driving by the Barn when it was being torn down, driving to it and getting this trunk from one end of the barn as the other end was being demolished. He picked it up, brought it east with him while he attended Boston University and later left it with his sister who used it in the many moves her family had to make while her husband served in the military.

The DeVards were a troupe of flyers assembled by Art Concello in a time when the circus-going public still fondly recalled the Flying Wards. In 1938, the DeVards consisted of Bob, Frances and Maxine Musselman, Eldon Day and Joe Remillet. By 1939, a slimmed down DeVards were trouping through Australia with the Wirth Circus. Eldred and Mitzi Sleeter and an as-yet identified member made up the act that year. Their little daughter, Jeanne, performed in the ring on a pony.

The back cover shows the inside cover of the Geraldos' trunk. Madeline and Rene Rousseau were the double trapeze act by this name. Originating in France, they came to perform for the Ringling Brothers and

Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1949. Like the DeVards trunk, it bears the acronym "MDR" for Men's Dressing Room. This trunk found its way to us via Norma Fox and Willie Edelston who believed Illinois State University should have possession of it given the fact that this community was the pivotal training place for aerialists for so long. Photos seen tacked up represent the subjects of this issue: The YMCA Circus, Erma Ward, Pawnee Bill, the Valentine brothers, and Carl and Dorothy Durbin.

Trunks were a part of every trouper's life and we are delighted that generous people saw fit to get them to us. They will be kept here and used as a tantalizing reminder for researchers of all levels to look inside to learn more.







A postcard shows the Bloomington, Illinois YMCA building, corner of East and Washington Streets, constructed c. 1907.

Author's collection



## ***The Greatest Little Show on Earth: The YMCA Circus of Bloomington, Illinois***

*by Steve Gossard*

### **Early History**

In 1907 a short blurb in the circus columns of *Billboard* magazine listed the names of various circus performers wintering in Bloomington, and made the off-hand statement that Bloomington had almost enough performers to stage a circus of its own.<sup>1</sup> This may not have been the actual inspiration for the first indoor circus which was held in Bloomington (the original idea likely originated from the Edward Shipp Indoor Circus of Petersburg, Illinois), but it certainly illustrates that the time was ripe for it.

While Bloomington was not unique in having a number of people who had been lured into the glamorous lifestyle which the circus presented, it was unusual in that these people still thought of Bloomington as their home even after their travels had taken them over the entire country and beyond.

### **The First YMCA Circus-1910**

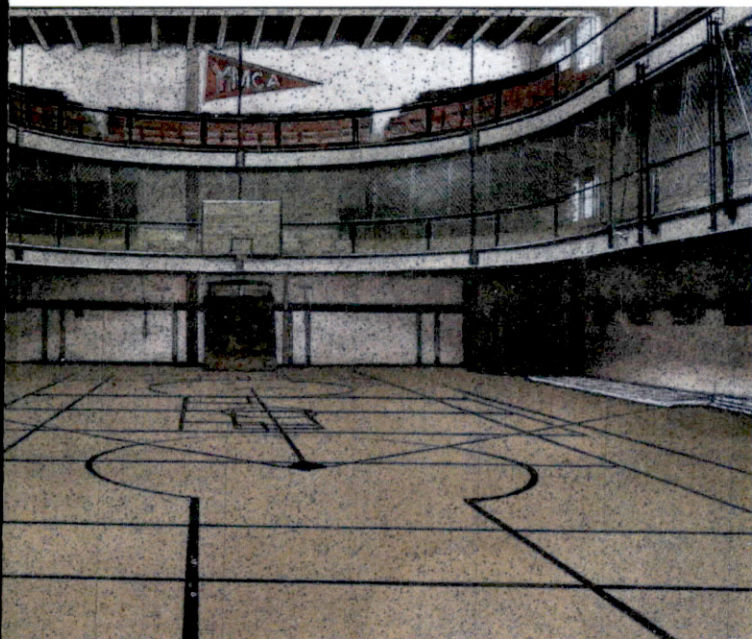
The first presentation of the YMCA circus was a milestone, as the circus performers received community recognition and support for the first time. The community

became involved with circus entertainment and the performers became involved professionally in a community activity. It was a unique reciprocal arrangement. Articles appeared in the *Pantagraph* on December 23 and 30, 1909,<sup>2</sup> stating that between thirty and forty men were preparing for the show; which would include two flying trapeze acts, slack wire, a comedy "baseball game," a comedy strong man, Mr. Johnson on the single trapeze, the Aerial LaMonts, tumbling, clowns on roller skates, music from the Orphans Home band, animals, and "a patriotic finale." There would also be an after show of fancy diving and "water freaks."

Advertisements appeared in the Bloomington *Bulletin* and the *Pantagraph* the last week of December 1909 announcing the "Four Claws and Stingling Bros. World's Greatest Circus" with two performances New Year's Day at 3:00 and 8:15 PM. Admission was \$.25 for adults and \$.15 for children under sixteen. The name "Four Claws and Stingling Brothers" was a satirical play-on-words of the names of the well-known circuses, Forepaugh-Sells Bros., and Ringling Bros.

The program of seventeen displays as recapped in the *Pantagraph* Jan. 3 ran as follows:<sup>3</sup>



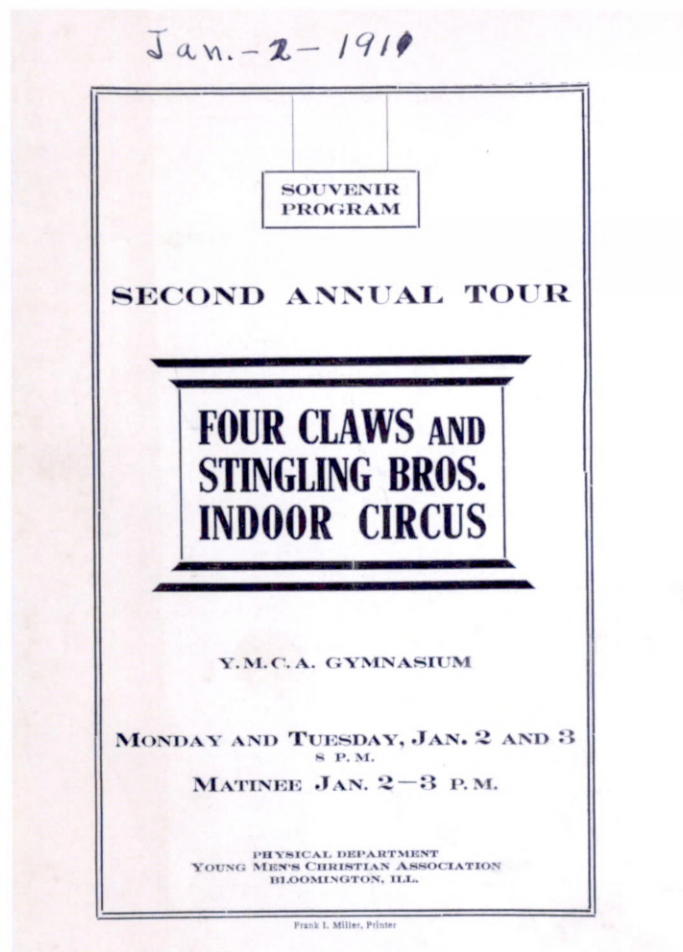


Above, the Bloomington, Illinois YMCA gymnasium where acts as diverse as trapeze, children's tap dancing, and bear and lion acts were performed between 1910 and 1942.

Author's collection

Right, a Bloomington YMCA Circus program cover, 1911.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections



Preliminary: Dutch boy, Dutch woman, monkey, policeman.

Grand Entry  
Leaps  
Double Trapeze  
Trained Elephants  
Dive of Dope  
Apparatus Work: Horizontal Bars  
Umbrella  
Water Trick  
Balancing  
Crazy Number: Dynamite Box  
Clown Baseball Game  
Slackwire  
Shaving Stunt  
Single Trapeze  
Shooting  
Tumbling  
Roller-skating  
Comedy Boxing  
Final Strain

The patrons of the first annual "Y" circus were greeted with "conditions that brought one from the chilly breeze of winter to the hot tent of summer time," according to the *Pantagraph* review of it.<sup>4</sup> The lobby was decorated with scenes of caged animals "along the tent walls," and according to the *Bulletin* Jan. 2 the left wing of the main corridor was partitioned off with sheets of canvas to provide a side show. "Leather lunged *barkers* with megaphones... discoursed freely as to the merits of their pop corn, Cracker Jack and peanuts."<sup>5</sup>

The sideshow included the "famous water rat exhibit" along with Bloomington's 500+ pound "Baby Bliss" in the pool. This was called "the after show," and it was said to feature the "Nigger mermaid, Loy McIntosh; world's youngest swimmer, Monroe; water rat, Hair rat, and a (toy) diving jackrabbit." There was a diving exhibition which included Baby Bliss. Many years later a *Pantagraph* article stated that the "old timers" could still recall this first "Y" circus. They could recall the ushers having trouble keeping the crowd in their seats long enough to see the main features because so many people were anxious to see Baby Bliss in the pool.<sup>6</sup>





*Baby Bliss, c. 1910.*

Author's collection



*Eddie and Jennie Ward, c. 1910.*

Author's collection

There were about 50 performers taking part in this first performance, not including members of the band, and over one hundred persons took part in one capacity or another. The music was provided by the band from the Soldiers Orphans' Home. At the end of the introductory procession the clowns' band "issued its weird strains in as many volumes as there were players."

The preliminary work of the clowns kept the audience's attention before the Grand Entree. At the same time the clown policeman tried to keep order in the house "in the typical manner of the average officer of the law" by walking "as slowly as he can" and sending "in a call for the patrol at all times because he is afraid to touch the offenders."

The grand parade included "two monster elephants, the trained horses and a whole array of clowns." Of course the YMCA could not permit horses, much less pachyderms on the gym floor. It is best left to the imagination just how

these "animals" were displayed.

The fact that the double trapeze act was presented by amateurs underscores the fact that women were excluded from the program of these early performances. If women had been permitted to participate in this performance Eddie and Jennie Ward would likely have been on the program together. But while we are told that the amateurs were "exceptionally good" they certainly could not have compared to the Flying Wards, who were one of the most spectacular features of the Ringling Bros. Circus for seven years.

The *Bulletin* article described the "dive of dope" which followed:

The dive of dope was one of the most laughable features of the program. Professor Dope got cold feet at the last moment and Professor Buttinski (Jim Scofield) was substituted in his place. The



bogus professor climbed the ladder to the dizzy height and was then concealed in the folds of a big curtain hung under the skylight. The clown held out a tablecloth in which the professor was to drop and the crowd held its breath in the intense excitement of the moment when the artist leaped from the top of the ladder. The body fell into the cloth and was hurried out.

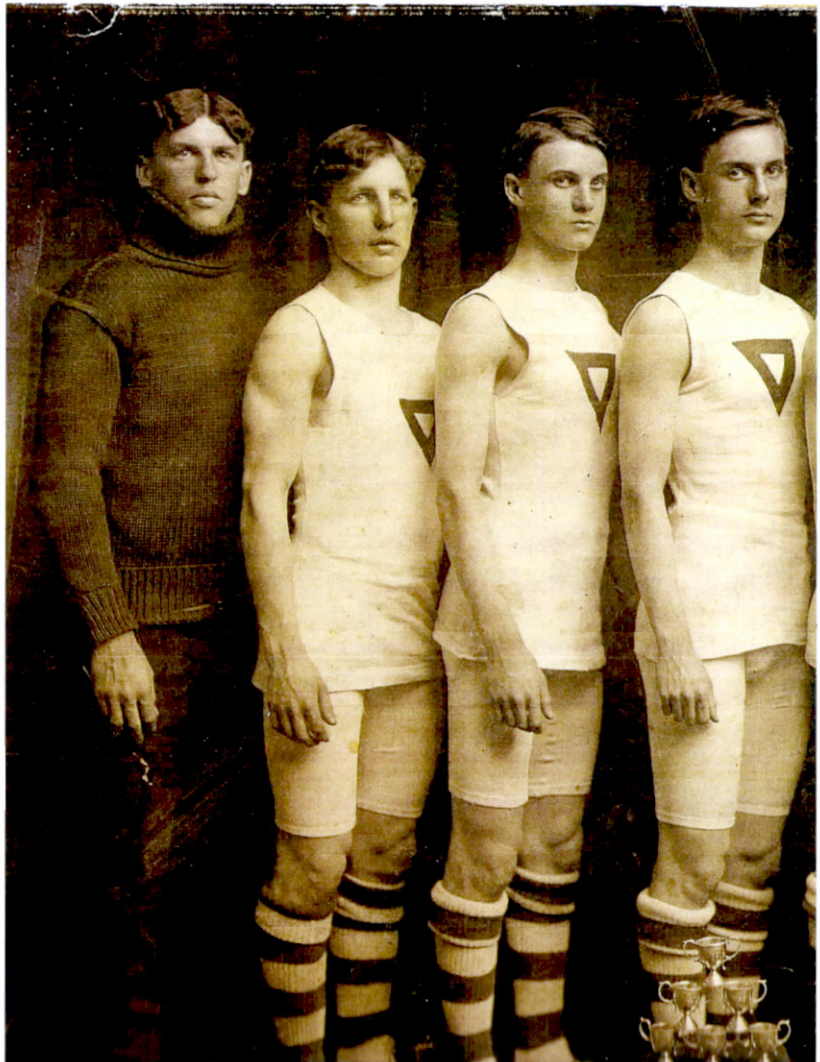
The article further disclosed that this was not the professor himself, of course, but a dummy which had been substituted while the intrepid performer made his escape through the skylight.

The shaving stunt performed in a mock "ton-sorial parlor" also drew praise. It was said that the clowns "provoked the crowd to continued laughter," and the spectators were amused, trying to guess the identity of each clown. The reviews also mentioned the slack wire performance, and mentioned an act called "Mussellinski" during the tumbling exercises.

The total number of persons attending both performances numbered nearly 1500, a number which was "beyond all expectations" with the evening attendance being slightly larger than that of the afternoon. This presentation was so successful that it was anticipated that the "Y" circus would become an annual event, to be presented each year on New Year's Day. "The entire show," the *Pantagraph* stated, "was one of laughter, fun and keen enjoyment to the finish. To describe what was done is impossible, for every minute revealed something new." The crowd was described as "orderly and satisfied." The *Bulletin* stated that "it would have been impossible to accommodate a larger crowd." The performers participated free of charge and the total profits, estimated at \$175 after expenses, went to the YMCA. This may not seem like a great deal of money, however it seems more impressive to consider the fact that seats were sold at \$.15 to \$.25 apiece. No doubt the purpose of the performance was not to realize an enormous profit, but was consistent with the YMCA's commitment to community service.

### 1910-1911

The winter of 1910-1911 two circuses were presented in the city of Bloomington. In addition to the YMCA circus, the Eagles Club also presented an indoor circus at the



Lloyd Eyer, second from left, YMCA director YMCA 1905-1917.

Courtesy of the Bloomington, Illinois YMCA

Coliseum. Advertisements for the "Y" circus appeared in the *Bulletin* Dec. 28 and 30. The Eagles Club was advertised Dec. 26, 28, and 31 of 1910. Matinee performances of the Eagles' Club Circus would be held Monday, Wednesday and Saturday at 2:15 PM, and evening performances every night at 8:15 from December 26 to the 31<sup>st</sup>. The "Y" circus was presented Jan. 2 and 3 of 1911 at 8:00 PM with a matinee on the second at 3:00 PM.

### The YMCA Circus

In order to accommodate more people, the YMCA performance was extended over a two-day period. It was decided that it would be expedient to advertise the tentative program in advance to give the public a foretaste of what was to come rather than waiting until after the show was over to publish an afterblast. Programs for the 1911



circus were published both in the *Bulletin* on Dec. 27, and in the *Pantagraph* Dec. 29:

The Grand Entree  
Trained Elephant Act  
Leaping  
Demonstration of Duck Hunting  
Revolving Ladder Act  
Clown Number – Celebrating the Fourth of July  
Trick Bicycle Riding  
Bareback Riding  
Hypnotic Demonstration  
The Educated Pig  
Flying Rings  
Unexpected Air Voyage  
Side Parallel Bars  
The Swing of Death  
Tumbleweed Brothers  
Scene in a Local Dental Parlor  
Double Horizontal Bars  
Clown Holiday  
Acrobatic Number – Hand to Hand Balancing  
Spectacular Drill – Ten Boys<sup>s</sup>

The *Pantagraph's* extensive review appeared January 3 and elaborated on the description of these acts, presumably in Lloyd Eyer's own words.<sup>9</sup> Eyer, Director of the Y, made a conscious attempt at satire in writing the program, alluding to the traditional exaggerations that the American circus had always been known for. Doors were to open at 2:30 and 7:30 PM. A concert by the band followed the "Big Show."

The grand tournament parade was described as "A satisfying, gratifying, ennobling, superb and sublime spectacular prelude," among other glittering adjectives and

*Gene Enos (center) and Mary Enos (right) with an unidentified girl performer, c. 1910.*

Author's collection



superlatives. The two "Animal Giants of the Arena," Baksb and Iahi were probably the same "animals" which had graced this circus the previous year.

Other features worth remarking were the fourth event, the "Day's Outing on Sugar Creek," a demonstration of the renowned sport of hunting and fishing on dry land. Introducing the world famed rain and wind makers." Gene Enos and Hendryx followed with their revolving ladders act. The next event, the Fourth of July holiday in "Clownville," said to be a "suburb of Towanda," Illinois, was called "Foolish Fallows Fourth" in the *Pantagraph*. The LaRouse bicycle act followed this feature with no explanation of who was performing or how the act was presented. "Miss Primrose Ahlerouski on the galloping horse (watch the gallop)" was described as "dainty and dexterous" with costume designed by "Madame Fluffaid." Prof. Flinstd's "awe-inspiring exhibition of Physco force and Magnetism" was said to have been seen by the "crowned heads of Europe and the bald heads of America" for a half-century. Little was said of the "Educated Chunk of Pork" except that it should "make infants look to their laurels." A live pig may have been used in this case. Trained pigs were popular clown gags in the early part of the century.

The description of "Monsieur Ziporlano" and his "Unexpected Air Voyage" was as extensive as the description of the aerial acts.

Next on the program the "White Duck Troupe" performed on the aerial bars. Four more comedy routines followed in succession: Dorado's "Swing of Death;" the Tumblebug Bros., comedy acrobatic act; Rev. Sambo Hawkins and the Huggins, a routine called "Roll Dem Bones;" and Dr. Ogengesloht, D.M.X.Y.Z., a "demonstration of painless molar extraction." The Fisher Trio bar act was described as "unparallel, parallelistic." This was followed by the clown's holiday. The two hand balancers with the DeVons act were not identified. They may have been amateurs from the YMCA physical education program.

The finale of the program, the "Radiumites" was probably a group of YMCA boys



giving a display using implements which had been decorated with luminous paint. In those days the dangers of exposure to such substances were not yet public knowledge. The "fire-like implements were artistically manipulated." In following years these displays of simple choreography would become a standard feature of the "Y" circus, which gave the younger boys a chance to participate in the big show.

The last act was said to have been secured "at enormous expense." The grand tournament was "the costliest display ever seen here." And Dorado's "Swing of Death" was "secured at a cost of \$20,000." This was quite an expense for a show which had grossed only \$175 the year before, and is indicative of the general flavor of farce which dominated the entire program. The satirical and comic elements were the main feature of this program, with 10 of the 20 displays being purely comic routines. As much if not more description was lavished on these comedy acts in the *Pantagraph* review as was given to the more serious acts. If the humorous angle seems to have been overdone, it may have been the only way the YMCA circus had of coping with the stiff competition posed by the Eagles' circus that year. Yet in spite of the heavy competition the "Y" circus must have been a success once again, for it would be presented again in 1912.

## The Coliseum Circus

In spite of the obvious competition between the "Y" circus and the Eagles' Club circus it should not be assumed that the circus at the Coliseum was a conspicuous effort to undermine the YMCA presentation. It was rather an attempt to expand the mutual involvement between the professional circus people and the Bloomington-Normal community. There is no indication that there was any animosity between those involved in either circus.

The fact that so many of Bloomington's professional circus people chose to participate in the Coliseum circus is an indication that they preferred an arrangement whereby ladies could be allowed to work. In this case the Coliseum circus was successful in bringing about a change in the future YMCA Circus policies.

On January 14, 1911 an article appeared in *Billboard* magazine which pretty much summed up the program of the Coliseum circus in one paragraph:

An indoor circus was recently given by the Aerie of Eagles. The company was gotten together by Eddie Ward, of the Flying Wards, and Edward LaMar, of the LaMar Troupe. Those who took part



Leo Hendryx, from a group photo of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, 1914.

Author's collection





*The Kelly La Tell troupe, c. 1915.*

Kitty Kelly collection, courtesy of Jan Costello, Petersburg, Illinois

in the performance were: Donahugh and Hamilton, comedy acrobats; Miss Victoria Davenport, horseback rider; The Flying Wards, aerialists; Dan Kelly and his giraffe, Jocko; The Four Kellys, tight-wire artists; Orrin Davenport, somersault rider and equestrian; Miss Kelly, globe roller; Charles Smith and assistants, clowns; LaTell Sisters, human butterflies, in a mid-air act swing by the teeth; The Arisato Troupe of acrobats and equilibrists; the Two Davenports, horseback riders; Miss Edith Fisher, in a trapeze and revolving act; and the LaMar Troupe, trapeze artists.<sup>10</sup>

A more detailed description was published in the *Pantagraph* December 27<sup>11</sup> mentioned the Hines-Kimball troupe of acrobats.

The Eagles Club Circus of 1910 was not repeated, at least not any time soon after. The reason for this was probably due to the fact that the show was not fi-

nancially successful. "The patrons went away delighted with the excellent quality of the show," the *Pantagraph* reported January 2, 1911. "It is unfortunate that the stellar character of the exhibition was unable to attract adequate patronage. Counter attractions and the close proximity to the holidays was largely responsible however."<sup>12</sup>

## 1912

Advertisements for the third annual "Four Claws and Stingling Bros. Circus" ran in the local papers from December 28 through January 2 and the performances were to be given January first at 2:30 and 8:00 PM, and on the second at 8:00 PM. Admission was again established at \$.25 for adults and \$.15 for children under 16. The *Pantagraph* stated December 29 that "everything is in readiness and the performers will hold their last rehearsal tonight."<sup>13</sup> There were no advance ticket sales, and no reserved seats. The program included twenty-two events, and was to run as follows:



*Edward Foreman Lav Mar, c. 1900.*

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Special Collections



The Grand Tournament  
 Animal Giants of the Arena  
 Nobodies from Nowhere  
 Out for a Plunge  
 The Clowns' Glorious Fourth  
 Dorado in His Slide for Life  
 Leapers  
 Arnold Les Stuge – slack wire  
 Baseball  
 1912 Racers  
 The Aerial Enos  
 Prof. Herman – magic feature  
 Jocko, the Educated Giraffe  
 The Garland Entree  
 Spakhetti Brothers  
 Midnight Attack on the National Bank of Shirley  
 The Surprise Lunch  
 Flying LeClaires – double trapeze  
 U. R. Next - tonsorial comedy  
 The Great Balloon Horse, *Jupiter*  
 The Flying Fishers – flying return act and trampoline

Several of the acts presented in 1912 were repeats of earlier performances which had been crowd pleasers. Among these were the barbershop skit and "Dorado's Slide for Life." The *Bulletin* stated that these acts were applauded "as if they were on the opening performance two years ago."<sup>14</sup> This would be analogous to television sit-coms of today which repeat the same jokes weekly but still draw the same viewing audience week after week. Of Dorado's "slide for life" the *Bulletin* stated, "the dummy which descended on the cable, brought a yelp from many an uninformed woman in the house, making the act realistic and more greatly enjoyed."

In the preliminary skit, Love and the monkey were "showered occasionally with money-from pennies on up." The "Nobodies from Nowhere" were a group of clowns on aerial bars and trapeze doing "mid-air comedy." This was followed by an imitation of a "man taking a mid-summer plunge in the limpid waters of Sugar Creek." Sugar Creek was, in fact, a favorite swimming hole in those days. Gene Enos' iron jaw routine was described as being "of a hair raising variety." Dressed as a woman, he "pulled off one of the neatest acts of the days."

Prof. Herman "mysteriously transported" a boy from one box to another, and "when the truth was known and Hall and Worth Coruthers jumped from their... hiding places a good hand was given the performance. The simi-

larity of the twin brothers made the act a successful one." Jocko, the educated giraffe, was obviously inspired by (if not procured from) Dan Kelly's performance at the Coliseum the year before. This is another indication that the Coliseum circus had not been a conscious effort to inhibit the success of the "Y" circus, but all having been accomplished in the spirit of co-operation. Again the garland entree enabled the younger boys to participate in the program along with the professionals. Following the "Spakhetti Brothers" act the next act was described in detail:

In the next act the greatest thing noticeable was a large rope which was being upheld in a masterful manner by a man of large proportions. The rope approached three inches in diameter. Tied to the other end of the rope was a dog, hardly approaching three inches in diameter, which pulled doggedly-but to no avail. A clown nearly the size of Baby Bliss, who was recognized as R. Love, stalked in with a long whip in his right hand, and on the other end of which was a gyrating spider. The so-called *spidermengitis* was a success, due to the tantalizing manner of the executor.

In the midnight attack on the "Bank of Shirley," (Shirley, Illinois) a safe had been "constructed to meet with the approval of the robbers." A *Pantagraph* article of Jan. 2 described yet another of the clown stunts, the "Surprise Lunch:"

...a clown entered, carrying a box which was labeled *Red Hots*. Another clown, anxious to partake of the delicacies, ate his fill. Thereupon the box was switched, showing the label *Dog Biscuits*. The sudden sickness of the one who partook of the buns, was just cause for the doctor's arrival. The attention paid to the patient was one of the features of the show.<sup>15</sup>

The double trapeze routine was presented by two amateurs, "Their performance was not of the clownly variety, being of a scientific and startling nature. The two show unusual promise."<sup>16</sup>

The climax of the program was also the finale. The Flying Fishers were allowed to set up their stage rigging on the floor of the gymnasium, and for the first time the spectators of the "Y" circus were able to view one of Bloomington's own flying return acts; the performance which had





Clyde Noble's Flying Fishers; Clyde Noble, Frank Cunliffe, Freddie Johnson, c. 1910.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

made the city famous among circus people throughout the country. The result was a sensation. Two articles from Clyde Noble's scrapbook on file in the Circus & Allied Arts Collection of Illinois State University's Milner Library Special Collections give a brief description of their act:

Leaving a swinging trapeze and turning single or double somersaults and finally being caught by another member of the troupe suspended by the legs from a horizontal bar is one of the many startling feats which they perform. The comedian does some really clever work, and at the same time succeeds in keeping the house in thoroughly good humor.

There are three members of the troupe, all of whom are men, and their aerial work, which is performed on two trapezes, is certainly marvelous. One of the Fishers takes the role of the clown, performing many side splitting stunts which keep the audience in a roar of laughter.

The stage rigging was considerably shorter than an actual circus rigging. While this inhibited their mobility somewhat, it did afford one advantage. With the net stretched tight enough to be used as a trampoline, Harrold, playing the clown, could bounce from the net back to the flybar. This was an innovative variation from the usual flying trapeze routine. Clyde Noble was the catcher for the troupe, and Freddie Johnson was billed as the more "scientific" of the two flyers. Johnson usually closed the act with numerous bounding stunts, using the net as a trampoline. The *Bulletin* stated that "this act actually brought people to their feet, screaming with applause" while the *Pantagraph* stated that the Fishers "brought the house to their feet with their hair-raising aerial feats."<sup>17</sup>

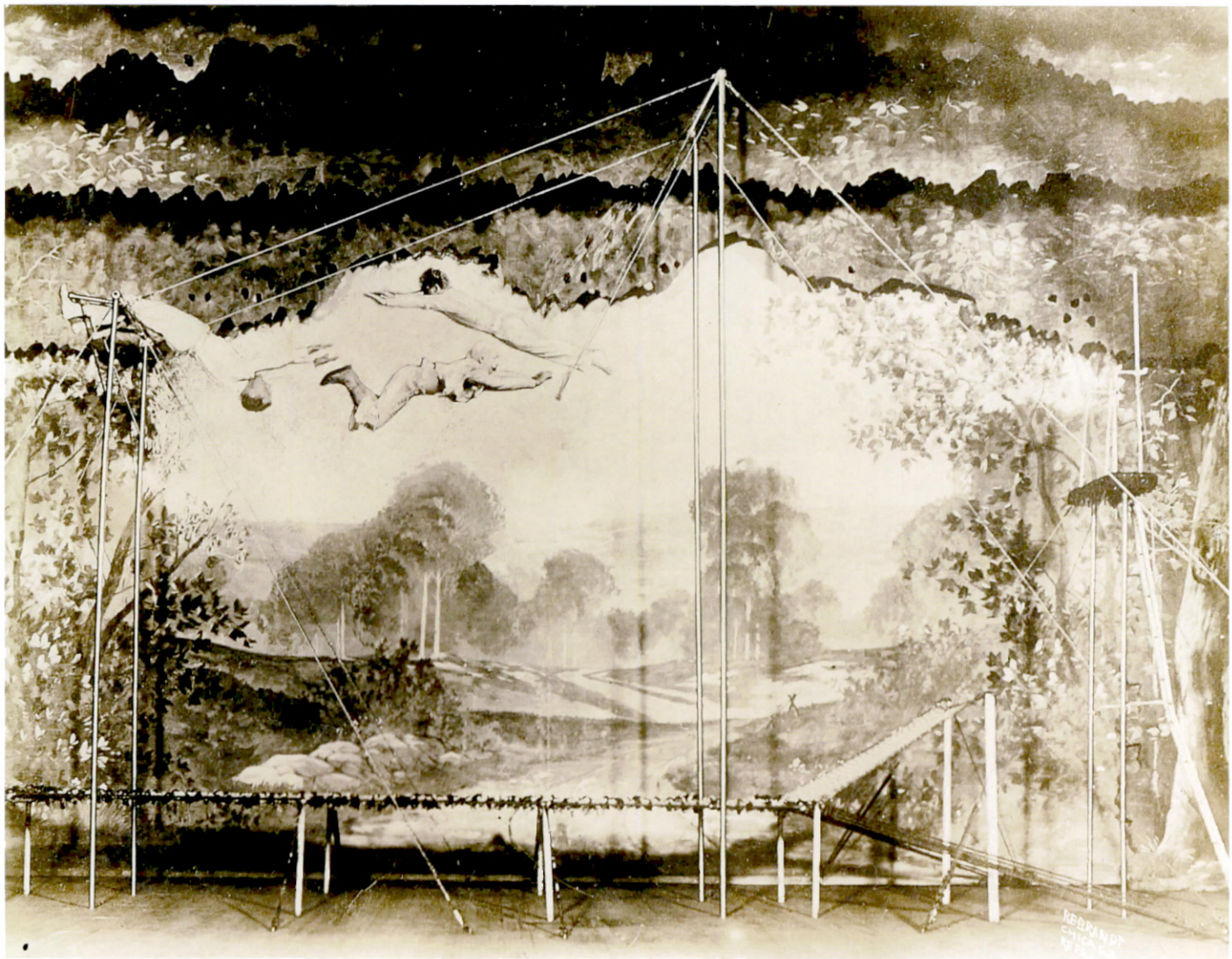
Given the success of the "Y" circus presentations over the past three years, it is difficult to explain why the "Y" circus was not presented again for the following two years. The *Pantagraph* stated that a large audience had attended the first performance. The *Bulletin* stated that "an event has perhaps never met with more public approval in the history of the Y.M.C.A than the circus (sic.) of this year." The only logical explanation for this would be that there was a lack of professional talent available during this period.

## 1915

The YMCA Circus of 1915 was an isolated event, since there had been no circus presented since 1912, and the advent of WWI curtailed the presentation of another "Y" circus for another nine years. Yet the 1915 circus was a milestone in several respects. For the first time the program included women performers, and it brought professional acts from outside the community. This meant, of course, that performers need not be members of the YMCA to participate. It was decided to stage the circus in March rather than in mid-winter, thereby giving the performers the entire winter for practice and for travelling vaudeville circuits, making the performance just prior to the regular circus season. A presentation of this sort was still considered to be too much of an undertaking for the "Y" gymnasium to accommodate. The logistics of using the available space to best advantage had not yet been worked out. So the performance was staged in the Coliseum. The circus was originally planned for March 18, 19 and 20, but owing to the fact that the principle act of the show, the Flying Wards, would not be available until they had closed a performance at the New York Hippodrome, the show was postponed until the 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>.

A preliminary roster which appeared in the *Panta-*





Clyde Noble's *Flying Fishers* stage rigging, c. 1910.

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graph January 8 provided a tentative list of performers: Eddie and Jennie Ward, double trapeze; the Pacheco Family of acrobats from Chile, two men, two women, two boys; The Delfina Troupe, wire walkers, one man, two women and two boys; Gene and Mary Enos, high perch act; Rice, Bell and Baldwin comedy acrobats, including Bloomington native, Art Monette (Anderson); Mamie (sic.) Kimball (Mrs. Eddie Ward), cloud swing (an aerial act performed on a horizontal slack rope); and Mary Yelrom (Mrs. Gene Enos) on the rolling globe.<sup>18</sup> The *Pantagraph* article also stated that there would be amateur acrobatics by the members of the YMCA. The article went on to say that the reason that Eyer had been able to secure the participation of so many professional acts was because "there is now a great war on European soil," and "many acrobats were booked for European dates for the winter, but the war put an end to all such

prospects." Lloyd Eyer continued as Director of the YMCA for two more years.

Advertisements began appearing in the *Bulletin* and *Pantagraph* on March 21 billing "12 Big Acts" for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday March 25-27 with a Saturday matinee. The price of admission was increased to \$.50 for everyone (\$.25 for the matinee) and \$.25 extra for reserved seats. The "Y" committee may have been concerned that they would not make enough money to cover the rent for the Coliseum without increasing the price of admission.

An article from *Billboard* magazine March 13, 1915 listed the professional acts which would be provided:

Eddie Ward, of the Flying Wards, now at the Hipp., and Eugene Enos, of Bloomington, Ill. Will put on an indoor circus at the Coliseum in Bloom-





Jennie Ward, Eddie Ward, Mary Enos, Gene Enos, c. 1915.

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ington, Ill. for the Y. M. C. A., starting March 25 and showing for three days. Those engaged include the Delfinos Trio, European artists; Edward and Jennie Ward, double trapeze; Four Zabingos, club jugglers; Two Enos, high perch act; Clyde Fisher, casting act; Rice, Bell and Baldwin, comedy acrobats; Mayme Kimball and William Summers, cloud swing; August and September, clown entree; Pacheco Troupe, society acrobats; LaPetite Emila, globe act; Six Rawsollos, wire act; Six Flying Wards, in their big aerial return act.<sup>19</sup>

The program opened with the Flying Fishers act. "Noble sits high in the air," the *Pantagraph* stated, "and catches the two leapers in their various stunts from the horizontal bars and trapeze." The *Bulletin* stated March 26 that this act was "full of vigor and comedy." Following the YMCA boys' posing number Eddie and Jennie Ward presented their double trapeze act, which the *Bulletin* called "one of the best acts of the whole program."<sup>20</sup> This hardly did justice to the act which had been a sensation throughout this country and Europe for a number of years.

Since the news columns did not provide a listing of the acts in sequence it is difficult to say which was being pre-

sented next, but the *Bulletin* mentions Rice, Bell, and Baldwin presenting "the only talking and musical pig in the world."

The act by the LaJoes was described as "human foot juggling." This was what is known as a "Risley" act in which one performer lays on his back with his feet in the air. Another performer springs off of the feet of this understander doing various tricks. Since later remarks state that the Pacheco family had been seen in an earlier number it could be that the LaJoes were made up of members of the Pacheco family. Their twelve member clown band was to give a "popular concert" featuring a trombone solo.

A few lines from the *Bulletin* March 9, 1917 provide a brief description of the sensational perch act presented by Gene and Mary Enos:

On top of a pole 30 feet high Gene Enos balances and does lay-outs and plunges (sic.) while supported by Mary... The most dangerous stunt of the turn is a freestand done on the top of the pole. This is a stunt that causes shivers to run up and down the backs of the spectators as the least miscalculation would cause a hard fall. In supporting Gene his partner is carrying a weight of 175 pounds. Gene weighing 135 pounds and the pole 40 pounds. Mary who weighs 120 is the smallest woman in the world holding up a weight in this manner... For the finish Gene slides down the pole hitting the shoulder of his wife and makes a half somersault to the ground.

This article also describes Mary's rolling globe act:

This... stunt consists of running, dancing and juggling while on top of a wobbling globe...24 inches in diameter and weighs 40 pounds. In finishing the act she stands on the ball and rolls it up a 29 foot incline to a small stage 10 feet above the ground.<sup>21</sup>

Following the "Clown's Holiday" came the Delfino troupe of "tight wire runners, jumpers and balancers give an act seldom seen and are considered the best in this line



of work." The climax of this act was a "three high" wherein three people cross the wire at once with the three standing erect, each standing on the shoulders of the man below.

After intermission Mayme Ward and one of the fellows with the Ward troupe did a "cloud swing" number (swinging tricks performed on a horizontal rope). Though the *Bulletin* article stated that her partner was "Charlie Lane" the *Billboard* article was probably correct in identifying him as Billie Summers, since Billie was usually dressed as a woman with the act, and the cloud swing number was almost always done by women. This was followed by the comedy team of Rice, Bell and Baldwin which, it was said, "has been with the large circuses for the past eight years." Next the younger YMCA students presented an act called the "electric wand drill" which "gave the spectators a chance to cheer for the 'home boys.'"

Next Charles Smith and Charles Bell (of Rice, Bell, and Baldwin) put on a skit called "A Visit to Sugar Creek." Another *Bulletin* article from March 25, 1917 provides a bit of insight into how Smith developed his comic themes:

...a specialty which he will put on this year is the result of an experience in this city last winter. While here he tried to paper the ceiling in his kitchen.

It was not exactly a success but he got the idea of a clown act from the experience. He goes through an elaborate act in preparing paper for an imaginary ceiling. When the paper has been prepared he mounts a 14 foot ladder and starts to paper an imaginary ceiling when the trick ladder collapses precipitating him into the paste pots with the paper clinging to him.<sup>22</sup>

Reading humor into disaster, Smith was the kind of comic genius which was indicative of the times, and foreshadowed such greats as Buster Keaton. This construction work type of comedy act also foreshadowed such great routines as those perfected by Willie, West, and McGinnie in



Rice, Bell and Baldwin comedy act (Art Anderson, of Bloomington on right), 1923.

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later years.

Mitzie Yellowstone followed with a rolling globe and juggling act. This was Mary Enos, who, in calling herself "Mitzie Yellowstone" was probably taking a sentimental look back to her days with the Yellron Sisters when she had first come to this country. Next the Pacheco Family of acrobats presented their sensational act. Unfortunately there is no detailed description of their presentation. Before the Ward troupe presented their finale Billy Rice, of Rice, Bell and Baldwin, did a comedy skit as the village bill poster.

The Ward flying return act was described in a letter of application to the Ringling Bros. Circus in 1914. It consisted of passing leaps, a one-and-a-half somersault, a double somersault, twisters, double pirouettes, and other





*Flying Wards; Ernie Lane, Erma Hubbell, Bert Doss, Mable Hubbell, Eddie Ward, Jessie Hubbell, 1921.*

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small tricks. A "passing leap" or "forward over passing leap" consists of the catcher returning one flyer to the flybar as another flyer swings out to make a hand catch, the two flyers passing in the process. The ladies finished the act with double somersaults into the net, and one of the fellows in the act was doing a triple somersault into the net. By 1915 the Wards may have been presenting a two-and-a-half somersault to a hand catch also, since they now had Ernie Lane working with them, and were, no doubt, working on more advanced tricks. It is remarkable to consider that, under Eddie's direction, Ernie was turning a triple somersault to a hand catch within only one year. Only one other person in the world was completing this trick at that time; Ernest Clarke, of the Clarkonian flying act.

There is every indication that the 1915 YMCA Circus was a success not only from the standpoint of the quality of the performance, but also from the proceeds realized. For the first performance alone one block of seats were

sold to the Masons, numbering 250. The *Bulletin* stated, "A large crowd is expected this evening, and larger crowds Saturday afternoon and night." Although a later *Bulletin* article (March 28) stated that the expenses of the circus were high, and "counter attractions" had restricted attendance at the circus, they also stated that the larger attendance at the final performance would enable the YMCA to break even. "The production easily ranks with the best," the article stated, "ever attempted in Bloomington and was deserving of a much larger attendance... the management could not have assembled a stronger array of talent."<sup>23</sup>

## 1924

With the influence of the YMCA practice facili-

ties and Eddie Ward's training barn, Bloomington came to be the focus of activity for aerialists throughout the country. Between 1920 and 1930 the city's population increased from 29,000 to 31,000. During the period from the 1920s into the 1950s downtown Bloomington was to circus flyers what Greenwich Village was to artists, writers, and musicians. A permanent trapeze rigging was strung from the ceiling braces in the YMCA gym and each winter a schedule was worked out to budget time for each flying act to practice. During winter months practice lasted through the night and spilled over into early morning discussions over coffee at Thompson's Cafeteria on the west side of the square two blocks from the "Y" building. There the flyers would work out problems with this trick or that, sometimes making crude diagrams of twists and turns, flybars and riggings on napkins and tablecloths. Old tricks were perfected. New tricks were suggested. These were exciting times.

For some unknown reason, Lloyd Eyer's conception



of the grand indoor circus was forgotten for nine years. Then, in 1924 the "Y" Circus was again revived, and continued to operate until the onset of WWII. Ads for the 1924 YMCA Circus appeared in the *Pantagraph* from March 22<sup>nd</sup> through the 26<sup>th</sup>. The performance was to be staged March 25, 26, and 27 at 8:15 PM with a children's matinee at 2:15 PM Wednesday. Admission was \$.50 for evening performances and \$.15 for the matinee. The performance was held in the gymnasium of the Illinois Wesleyan University.

The program as printed in the *Pantagraph* articles March 26:<sup>24</sup>

Concert - Bloomington High School Band  
 May Pole Dance - Girls of the YWCA  
 Garland Entree - 16 older YMCA boys  
 Swinging Ladders - Ward Sisters, Fisher Sisters and Miss Palmer  
 Flag Drill - YMCA preps and juniors  
 Acrobatic Act - Pontiac juvenile Acrobats  
 Erma Ward Aerial Act  
 Horizontal Bars - Charles Fisher Trio  
 Aerial Butterflies - Ward Sisters  
 The Act Beautiful - *living statues* - Y.W.C.A. girls  
 Monsieur LaBounce - Tom Herbert-Foot Juggling  
 Clown Numbers (throughout the program)  
 The Clown's Photographer  
 Who's Next at the Clown Barbershop  
 The World Famous Clown Band  
*Numerous Other Stunts*  
 Finale - Flying Wards

The before-show concert and music throughout the program was provided by the Bloomington High School Band under the direction of Edwin M. Gould.

At least five of the acts were amateur acts performed by the YMCA and YWCA members, as previously stated. Tom Herbert was the only professional from outside the community who performed with the "Y" Circus in 1924. His act was described as "feats of juggling, balancing of barrels and tables on his feet in the air." The Charles Fisher Trio presented a bar act. Of the clown acts, the skit "Who's Next at the Clown Barbershop" was described as "the operation of the clown hair growing machine demonstrated by Martin Homuth." Martin Homuth was secretary-treasurer of Burkland's Inc. jewelry shop. Clyde Noble had entered the jewelry trade years earlier in the Homuth jewelry shop on



*Flying Floyds; Arthur Nelson, Dolly Nelson, and an unidentified catcher with the act, c. 1920.*

Author's collection

the square, and since retiring from the circus business he had opened his own jewelry shop on the square in downtown Bloomington. The Wards' flying act provided the sensational finale.

The *Pantagraph* stated March 26 that "Despite the inclement weather a large crowd attended the first performance of the "Y" Circus... All of the boxes and the side seats in the galleries were taken." These sections were sold in advance to the Lions Club members, guests and families. The Lions Club was sponsoring the YMCA Circus that year; the proceeds of their share to provide the construction of a hut for the YMCA camp on the Mackinaw River.

According to a March 27 *Pantagraph* article, the March 26 performance had been attended by 1500 persons, as many as the combined total of both performances of the first YMCA Circus in 1910. A group of children from the Illinois Soldiers Orphan's Home had also attended the show. The box seats had again been sold out, this time to





Charles Waller's Flying Fishers act; Herb Fleming, Bob Musselman, Edith Waller, Charles Waller, unidentified girl flyer, c. 1915.

Author's collection

a group from the Young Men's Club, and advance sale of these seats for the following evening were taken by the Rotary Club. It was anticipated that "a substantial sum will be realized after the expenses are all paid."<sup>25</sup> It should be remembered that the main forms of entertainment in those days were circus, silent films and vaudeville. It is obvious that the population of Bloomington had not forgotten the quality of performances provided in the past by the YMCA Circus, and was hungry for this kind of diverse and sensational live entertainment.

### 1925

For some reason the *Pantagraph* coverage of the YMCA Circus in the 1920s was not as detailed as it had been, or would be in the future. Sometimes the news was confined to only a few paragraphs, as in 1925.

Advertisements for the 1925 YMCA Circus appeared

March 21, 23, and 25 stating that the show would be presented March 25, 26, and 27 at 7:00 P.M. General admission was set at \$.50, but seats could be reserved at W. B. Read & Co. (sporting goods), probably for a \$.25 service charge once again. Professional acts which were billed in these advance ads were the Wards, the Fishers, the Floyds, the Aerial LaRays and Howard Walsh. The Flying Floyds were Floyd and Dolly Nelson, and another flyer. They performed a flying return act, with Dolly doing all of the catching for the men, but they may have been doing another kind of aerial act for the YMCA Circus in 1925 since the Flying Fishers were performing their flying return act with the show.

With three performances they could avoid the expense of renting other facilities by accommodating a greater number of people in the "Y" gymnasium; and with the trapeze rigging strung from the gird-

ers in the ceiling they could present a full flying return act without sacrificing time and space in setting up and tearing down a rigging on the gym floor. Bleachers were brought in (probably from the high school just down the street) and erected on the gym floor. Chairs were placed along the running track at the mezzanine level, and there was also seating in the balcony. In this way a fairly large crowd could be accommodated, and a one ring circus could be presented in a fairly economical fashion.

For the first time since 1910 the attractions of the side show were listed in the *Pantagraph* review March 26: Dagmar, "the head without a body;" Cleopatra, "the spider with a girl's head; the living woman with only a head and trunk; the woman with a thousand eyes; and the girl who can sleep on the edge of a sword."<sup>26</sup> These attractions were open to the public a half hour before the regular show.

There were several amateur acts once again. The con-



cert was provided by the "circus band" – either the high school band once again or the community band. Harry R. Seamens, general secretary of the YMCA served as master of ceremonies and ringmaster. The first act was a ballet performed by 50 YWCA girls "who ranged from little tots, 3 and 4 years old to girls of high school age." The second act was a swinging ladders act performed by two small girls. The YMCA boys then presented a Zouave drill. This drill probably featured costumes which were constructed with a horse's head in front and hind quarters in the appropriate place. These "Zouaves" galloped in formation (as described by Walt Graybeal, who participated in one of these drills as a boy in the 1920s).

For the first time "Pop" Clifford Horton, Illinois State Normal University physical education director, participated in the "Y" Circus program. Horton, along with "Y" physical director, Clarence D. Curtis, and a young man named Art Vasconcellos (later shortened to "Concello") presented an act called the "Horton Family Tumblers." Art Vasconcellos' father was a machinist with the Chicago & Alton Railroad. Art was a boy who seemed to have a knack for getting into mischief, but Clarence Curtis recognized that this youngster had potential not only as an athlete, but also as a flamboyant showman. Art was one of the west side boys whom Curtis encouraged to develop his talents and to participate in the "Y" program. In time Concello would prove to be one of the most influential and significant showmen in American circus history.

As the program was written in the *Pantagraph*, it seems that all the professional acts were grouped at the end. The article did not mention where the Wards were situated on the program, however. They may have presented a number of aerial acts throughout the performance.

A one-legged acrobat named Foy Large, of Columbus, Ohio, was featured doing "acrobatic stunts on rings, tumbled and hurdled chairs, despite the fact that he has but one leg." The *Pantagraph* briefly mentioned that the work of the clowns was "pleasingly funny." A single trapeze number was presented by "LaRay, the flying wonder," which featured a "fall and heel catch" which brought the audience to its feet with applause.

Quite a bit of praise on the Fisher troupe in comparison to the other acts. The flying rigging, as described by Walt Graybeal, consisted of crane bars which were strung from the steel ceiling girders. The flybar and catchbar were both suspended from the crane bars. The pedestal board was mounted to the wall at about the same level as the balcony. C. D. Curtis and Marshall Lang, another YMCA employee,



C. D. Curtis, Arthur Concello, and unknown flyer, date unknown.

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also performed with the flying act. The climax of the act was described as "a triple somersault by Charles Fisher while blindfolded by a sack over his head from one trapeze to the arms of another member of the troupe." If Charlie Waller actually performed a triple somersault to a hand catch as described here it certainly would be one for the record books. Waller was not known to be a triple somersaulter, and no one, at that time, was ever known to have turned a triple blindfolded. What is more, a triple somersault requires the flyer to pump up with a great deal of height to his swing in order to complete all three somersaults, and the ceiling in the "Y" was just too low to allow the flyers to attain this much height. More likely, Waller probably threw a double, or a two-and-a-half at best. If Waller really did catch a triple somersault in 1925 the event certainly did not receive the attention which it deserved.



## 1926

Ads for the 1926 YMCA Circus were published March 20, 22, 23, and 24. The circus was to be presented on four consecutive days March 23 to 26 at 8:00 PM with a children's matinee Tuesday the 23rd at 2:15 PM. General admission price was again \$.50. Tickets for the matinee were \$.25.

On March 24 the *Pantagraph* recapped the first performance from the day before. "Outside of the regular performers, there is a long list of people who are putting forth all of their effort to make the show go off with a bang,"<sup>27</sup> the reporter said. Along with pointing out the contributions of amateur performers, the article also called attention to the "fine art" of the popcorn ball. The *Pantagraph* review of the circus March 25 began by remarking on the chorus of "Sleepy Time Gal" as performed by the YWCA girls. "Littlest, but not least of the chorus is the young lady who enters last."<sup>28</sup> This sounds very much like a timeless prototype of every child's dance class, and a sizable portion of the receipts taken in by the YMCA could, no doubt, be credited to family and friends of these little troupers, who came to see the show.

The band which provided the music for the show was not identified this year. Since the swinging ladders number by the YWCA girls was mentioned along with a contortion act by Walt Graybeal,

it may be that both acts were presented at the same time, the girls performing above as Walt worked in the "center ring." Graybeal's act commenced with two men carrying out a box of about two foot square into which Walt had folded himself. Emerging from the box, Graybeal proceeded "twisting himself into various shapes," hooking his legs behind his head and walking about on his hands in this position, standing flat-footed and bending over until his torso

extended between his legs to wave at the audience from this curious position, and other feats of surprising flexibility.<sup>29</sup>

YMCA boys appeared in a "prep" Indian drill using phosphorescent clubs. Then "everyone holds his breath while the dangers of eating hot dogs that are too hot and 'Doc' Crosby performs an emergency operation with startling results." Another clown number featured a "difficult

levitation feat." Amateur performer, Irwin Moynahan then presented a hand balancing act along with Art Vasconcellos. Again Clifford Horton contributed to the program with a trampoline act along with one of his students at ISNU. Later in the program Horton's "biggest and best" from the advanced tumbling class put on a gymnastic feature. Horton, it was stated, "is not only a good coach but a mighty good clown." At this time "Pop" Horton was thinking about organizing a fraternity of gymnasts at ISNU as part of a nation-wide program called "Gamma Phi." The "Y" Circus would prove to be an inspiration for him. C. D. Curtis presented a group of YMCA boys in a Garland Entree, the boys putting on a display of "horsemanship and cavalry maneuvers in a number well mounted and well drilled," no doubt making use of costumes designed the year before. A "living statue" exhibition "in gold" was presented. Acts of this sort were also popular with the big circuses. Gymnasts with "classical proportions" were covered with a metallic substance, and strike "artistic" poses to simulate classical Greek

or Roman figural sculpture.

The Fisher troupe provided all the professional talent for the "Y" Circus in 1926. The aerial Julians' double trapeze act was made up of Bud Asher and his wife, Julia Julien, of Galesburg, who were working with the Fishers' flying act. This act was said to be "remarkable because Miss Julien...only had three rehearsals on the new act and at that made everybody jump when she zipped to the floor on a



**Clifford E. Horton, new director of athletics at State Normal, who in nine months has built as fine a system of intra-mural athletics as is to be found anywhere in the Middle West.**

*Clifford Horton, The Pantagraph, June 10, 1924, p. 10.*





*Bob Fisher's Five Fearless Flyers; Bob Musselman Fisher, Francis Musselman, Everett White, Gracie Moore, Harold Genders, 1932.*

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rope trapeze held by her partner on the high swing." This trick was called a "break-away" and is said to have been invented by Eddie and Jennie Ward years earlier.

The grand finale was made up of a double flying act with the Fishers and the "Y.M. Flyers" working together. The Fisher troupe that year was made up of Charles and Edith Waller, Bud and Julia Asher, and Elmo Rankin; but only Charles, Elmo, and Bud took part in the flying act at the YMCA Circus. The "Y.M. Flyers" were comprised of Clarence Curtis, Marshall Lang and Arthur Vasconcellos. At this time Eddie Ward recruited Art Vasconcellos for the Ward flying act, and Art performed with the Wards on the Sells-Floto show that year.

## 1927

So far there has not been any trace of a YMCA Circus presentation found for 1927. Instead, a circus was presented by the Women's Relief Corps at the Coliseum for three days with matinees daily beginning Monday, March 21. A detailed advertisement appeared March 19 announcing the 20 act circus presentation with the price of admission \$.50 for adults and \$.25 for children under 12.

The circus was strong in out-of-town professional acts, featuring the Orrin Davenport riding act, which returned to Bloomington for the first time since the Eagles Circus of 1911. They were advertised as having three ladies and two men with fine white Arabian horses, and were called the "World's greatest troupe of bare back riders direct from



American and European triumphs. (late of Ringling Bros. and Sells-Floto Circuses)." Victoria Davenport, "petite riding nymph," was also featured in a solo routine. Other professional acts included the Pallone Troupe, "equilibristic, acrobatic and gymnastic artists, formerly with the Barnum and Bailey and Sells-Floto Circuses." A solo aerialist called "Mlle. Yvette, Late of Ringling Bros., Barnum and Bailey" performed 100 muscle grinds. The Lester, Bell and Griffin Troupe performed the "world's greatest tumbling act." Of this, a March 22 *Pantagraph* article stated that these "comedy acrobats kept the house in an uproar of laughter." The clowns were headed by Jos. Lewis, of the 101 Ranch Show, "the Dave Warfield of Circus Clowns." Earl Shipley, "clown extraordinary," of the Hagenbeck Wallace Circus, was given separate billing. [A few years earlier Shipley had approached Eddie Ward requesting that Eddie take his nephew, Billy Ward (no relation to Eddie) into the flying act. Billy was now working with the Ward troupe.] It was said that "laughter and applause abounded" during the performance.

The hometown professionals were represented by Bob Fisher's Fearless Flyers. Bob Fisher (Musselman) was Charles Waller's brother-in-law.

This circus must also have featured quite a few amateur acts, since the advertisements stated that the program called for "11 other big surprises." One of these features during the first performance was an "unbobbed hair contest," in which 32 women participated. The following night would see the "bobbed hair" contest.

## 1928

March 1st it was announced that a committee would oversee the YMCA Circus.<sup>30</sup> It was generally understood each year that C. D. Curtis would be the production manager of the show. Advertisements for the 1928 YMCA Circus appeared March 22, 23, and 24 in the *Daily Pantagraph*. The show was to feature "15 Big Acts, A 3-Ring Comedy Riot-Clowns, Fun and Deviltry!" The circus ran Thursday, March 22 through Saturday the 24th at 8:00 PM with a children's matinee at 3:00 PM Saturday. Admission was \$.50, "all seats reserved," and children's tickets were priced at \$.25. From this point on the "Y" Circus would always be held in the YMCA gymnasium.

According to the *Pantagraph* review March 22 there were 150 performers participating. The music was provided by the Bloomington High School Band. The chairman of the 1928 circus was Joe Rohrer, who produced the event with C. D. Curtis and Lloyd Eyer.<sup>31</sup> It is not so easy to

distinguish the events which were amateur features from those which were professional on the program, as there was a mixture of amateurs and professionals working in many of the acts together. This is a good indication of the high quality from the pool of talent available.

Following the concert a ballet was presented by the YWCA girls. This was followed by a flag drill by 85 YMCA boys and YWCA girls.

Art Concello (now calling himself Art Ward) performed a single trapeze act, followed by the "All-Star tumbling trio." A clown number was presented next on the program, followed by a ladder pyramids display by the YMCA amateurs. Eddie Ward's bucking mule, "Dynamite," trained by Eddie's brother, Elzie, was featured on the program "with prizes for those who can ride him."<sup>32</sup>

Though the *Pantagraph* stated that both the Flying Fishers and the Flying Wards would be on the program it was not stated whether or not either, or both, would be presenting a flying return act. The article did not elaborate on this feature of the program.

A similar article ran in the *Pantagraph* March 23 which stated that an amateur would present a "dazzling ladder whir," and identified the Ward Sisters act as an iron jaw routine.<sup>33</sup> The "Razelli brothers" act was a tumbling act which was presented for many years at the "Y" Circus and the performers were not always the same from one year to the next. In 1928 this was a comedy routine which was done in clown face.

The Charles Fisher troupe that year consisted of Charles and Edith Fisher (Waller), Elmo Rankin, Everett White (their catcher) and Doris Sleeter. Their photograph appeared in the March 14 issue of the *Pantagraph*.

## 1929

Beginning in 1929 the *Pantagraph* coverage and advertisement of the "Y" Circus became more extensive. Ads appeared in the *Pantagraph* March 4, 6, 8, and 9 announcing that the two hour "Y" Circus program of 20 acts would be presented Thursday the 7th through the 9th at 8:15 PM with a Saturday matinee at 2:30. All seats required reservations, priced at \$.50, \$.75 and \$1. The March 8 and 9 ads stated that seats at the \$.50 and \$.75 prices were still available, the \$1 seats being sold out for both days in advance.

The advertisements provided nearly as much information concerning the acts as did the subsequent articles, which appeared in the *Pantagraph* March 5, 7, and 8. The articles often featured photographs and text concerning individual performers, as with the March 5 article on Erma





*Elza Ward with his trick horse, c. 1915.*

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Ward. The brief write-up called her a "circus ace," stating that she was with the Ward troupe on the Sells-Floto Circus.

Although the advertisements stated that the Wards, the Sullivans, the Fishers and the Flying Thrillers were all to be on the program it was understood that each troupe would not present a separate flying act. For advertisement purposes it was expedient to call attention to the troupes which would contribute personnel to the program. Other acts billed for the circus were the Ali Ben Hassi tumblers, an act made up of anyone who wanted to participate and was good enough to join in. The Aerial Patts, another Bloomington double trapeze team which specialized in astonishing contortion tricks were also on the bill, as were the Sleeters. Eldred, "Red" Sleeter, was a physical director at the "Y." He was primarily known as a slack wire walker, although he had worked with the Flying Sullivans as early as 1924 on the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey show.

The Flying Thrillers was a new act which Bert Doss and Harold Voise had formed when they left the Ward troupe in 1927. The catcher for this troupe in 1929 was probably Bob Brooks, another of Eddie Ward's students. About 100 performers took part in the 1929 "Y" Circus under the di-

rection of Lloyd Eyer and C. D. Curtis, all performers donating their services to the YMCA gratis, as usual.

Acts mentioned in the March 8 *Pantagraph* recap began with the YWCA girls, the girls of the Flying Wards, and Alice Rawlson, who opened the show with a dance number. This was followed by Constance Fisher (daughter of Charles and Edith Waller) and Mickey Ward (Mickey King) doing an aerial act, possibly a swinging ladders act which was Mickey's specialty in those days. "The Trail of the Lightning Bug" was an act put on by the YMCA junior boys using luminous Indian clubs. Nellie Sullivan performed an aerial number which the *Pantagraph* described as a flying act. The article also stated that the circus would feature tumblers and tight-rope walkers, no doubt referring to the Ali Ben Hassi troupe and Red Sleeter's act. Among other acts, the "Y" Circus also presented a display put on by boys from the Illinois Soldiers' Orphans Home.<sup>34</sup> **BW**

**Part 2 of this article will appear  
in the next issue of *Bandwagon*.**



## Acknowledgements:

A special thanks (not necessarily in this order, and some of whom I never met personally) to: Harold Ramage, Arnold Riegger, Walt Graybeal, Lorraine Valentine, Mickey King, Jim Olsen, Howard Waters, Hellen Billetti Warburton, Chuck Imig, Lowell and Mary Sherer, Manuel Cordero, Cherie Valentine, Dennis Watson, the family of the Flying Wards, Craig Voise, Dee Volle, the YMCA of Bloomington,

the staff of Milner Library Special Collections past and present, Maureen Brunsdale, Mark Schmitt, Teresa Thomson, Steve Meckstroth, Joan Winters, Arley Gillette, Jerry Polaeck, Al Light, Bill Jaeger, Russ Hany, Marcus Alouan, the Gamma Phi Circus organization, the Bloomington Public Library, the McLean County Historical Society, and the Circus Historical Society of America.

## Endnotes

1. *Billboard*, March 30, 1907, p. 30.
2. *Pantagraph*, "Preparing for Circus," December 23, 1909, p. 6 and "Program for the Indoor Circus," December 30, 1909, p. 9.
3. *Pantagraph*, "Indoor Circus a Big Success," January 3, 1910, p. 9.
4. *ibid.*
5. *Bulletin*, "New Year Crowds Attend Circus," January 2, 1910, p. 13.
6. *Pantagraph*, "Aerialists Recall Y Circus," February 3, 1955, p. 8.
7. *Pantagraph*, "Indoor Circus Big Success,"...
8. *Pantagraph*, "Y.M.C.A. Performers to Stage Production," December 29, 1910, p. 7.
9. *Pantagraph*, "Mock Circus Makes New Year's Meriment," January 3, 1911, p. 10. Quotes which follow come from this lengthy article unless otherwise noted.
10. *Billboard*, "Ring Barn Gossip," January 14, 1911, p. 20.
11. *Pantagraph*, "Indoor Circus Opens," December 27, 1910, p. 5.
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14. *Bulletin*, "Indoor Circus Again a Success," January 2, 1912, p. 4 Enos.
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18. *Pantagraph*, "YMCA to Stage Professional Circus," January 8, 1915, p. 9.
19. *Billboard*, "Hippodrome Chatter," March 13, 1915, p. 22.
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22. *Bulletin*, "C.A. Smith Off to Join the Circus," March 25, 1917, p. 22.
23. *Bulletin*, "YMCA Circus Comes to a Close," March 28, 1915, p. 2.
24. *Pantagraph*, "Y' Circus Last Night, Big Hit," March 26, 1924, p. 5. Quotes that follow come from this article as well.
25. *Pantagraph*, "Y' Circus Played to Big Crowd Last Night," March 27, 1924, p. 7.
26. *Pantagraph*, "Circus at Y.M. is Big Success," March 26, 1925, p. 12. The descriptions which follow come from this article.
27. *Pantagraph*, "First Production of 'Y' Annual Circus Given Yesterday," March 24, 1926, p. 6.
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29. For more information on Graybeal's career see my article, "Walt Graybeal's Bloomington," in *Bandwagon* 33(6), p. 35-41, November-December, 1989.
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32. *Pantagraph*, "'High Hat' Affair, This 'Y' Circus..." March 24, 1928, p. 3.
33. *Pantagraph*, "Clowns, Chewing Gum, Popcorn and Band at YMCA Circus," March 23, 1928, p. 13.
34. *Pantagraph*, "Varied Acts Mark Circus," March 8, 1929, p. 3.





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# Arms Race in Lace







# Erma Ward, Lillian Leitzel and the One Arm Plange

by Mark Schmitt

Between the years 1923 and 1929, the American Circus Corporation turned a Central Illinois woman by the name of Erma Hubbell, then a member of the Flying Wards, into their own version of Lillian Leitzel; by turns rival and imposter. Erma's story has none of the dramatic hallmarks that keep Leitzel's remarkable life afloat in the popular culture: her success on the Ringling Show; love affairs with impossibly rich suitors; marrying Alfredo Codona (the greatest aerialist to have flown up to that point and long after); her poetically tragic death, the grave marker to eclipse all grave markers; and Codona's increased recklessness and subsequent career ending injuries that led to his mad spiral into murder/suicide. Leitzel's act almost gets in the way of her story. Erma Ward's act stands in for her story. A great deal of what can be found about her in the press of the day is reformulated Leitzel backstory slapped onto this cipher of a woman. Erma Ward remains unknowable.

## The Known

Erma Hubbell was born in Norris, Illinois to Isaac and Maggie Hubbell on October 15, 1903. The Hubbell family, seven children strong, moved around Central Illinois for several years before settling near Peoria, where Isaac worked primarily as a coal miner. The three eldest Hubbell children, sisters Jessie, Mabel, and Erma, leapt from their humble beginnings and amazingly became members of the LeRoy Troupe with the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus as early as 1918. A grainy photograph included in newspaper and trade magazine advertisements for the circus betrays their familiar faces and figures<sup>1</sup>. The sisters performed iron jaw and other aerial feats with the act. The LeRoy Troupe occupied a side ring to the Flying Wards' center ring in the same display on Hagenbeck-Wallace that year.

The Hubbell sisters (identified initially as the Royce sisters<sup>2</sup> or LeRoy sisters in the press) joined the Flying Wards in 1920 for a season playing parks and fairs.<sup>3</sup> In the two years prior to the arrival of the sisters, the Flying Wards had endured the deaths of Jennie Ward (co-founder of the Wards) and Bessie Cattnach in the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus train wreck of June 22, 1918, and saw the exit of prominent members of the act in Alec Todd to the Beckman-Todd Troupe and Billy Summers and his wife Myrl (Bonham), who formed their own team to play vaudeville. The Hubbell sisters (augmented later by a fourth sister, Inez) were a fortunate addition to the troupe, as they became notable features in the Flying Wards for several years to come. Erma Hubbell would take the professional name of Erma Ward (also frequently and inexplicably billed as Irma Ward) for the remainder of her long career.

*Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery - Erma Ward on Sells-Floto at her most Leitzel-like with a dour maid in tow. Date unknown.*

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*Erma Ward takes a turn at glamour in this promotional studio photograph circa the late 1920s.*

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Erma's career included performing with a number of circuses: Hagenbeck-Wallace (1918, 1929), John Robinson (1921-1922), Sells-Floto (1923-1928), Tom Mix and Sam B. Dill Three Ring Circus (1934), Tom Mix (1935-1938), Wallace Bros. (1941-1942), Clyde Beatty and Wallace Bros. Trained Wild Animal Circus (1943), Bradley and Benson (1946). Throughout her career, Erma also performed at parks and fairs, Shrine circuses, and could be consistently found on vaudeville stages across the country.

Erma Ward married Charles Arley of the 3½ Arleys (sometimes 4½), and despite the published report that she had obtained a divorce from him at the close of the 1934 season while on the Tom Mix Circus<sup>4</sup>, the couple took up residence in Los Angeles, CA. Erma's professional career was over by 1947, although she and her husband would regularly turn up on shows to visit. Charles Arley eventually left his career as a performer for a job as the head of



*1921 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey litho showing Lillian Leitzel performing her signature one arm plange.*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

construction at Columbia Pictures Ranch Studio. He died at the age of 49 on September 3, 1953 of a heart attack.

Erma performed in the flying return act of the Flying Wards as both catcher and flyer. Eddie Ward was atypical in his training and management of his performers in that everyone under his tutelage learned to perform both roles, regardless of gender or relative size. It would then not be unusual (but unusual and thrilling for the audience) to see a diminutive young woman catch a man. Also under the aegis of the Flying Wards act, Erma found herself in the spotlight as a feature attraction performing on Roman rings and doing one-arm throw-overs/planges.

Arguably, Lillian Leitzel's signature trick, thus Erma Ward's signature trick, was the endurance feat, the one arm plange. The plange, though not the most elegant sight to behold under the big top is exceptional for the grueling amount of them that practitioners try to achieve; one



wrist in a loop at the end of a rope, throwing their body over their dislocating shoulder, and popping it back into place for another turn or a hundred. Famed aerialist/fellow Flying Ward/sister to Antoinette Concello, Mickey King, would say of the aftermath of performing the one arm plange, "Sometimes I want to scream, and nearly always I have to cry after I get to the dressing room. And it isn't because I'm nervous, it's because I'm hurt. It feels like the hurts you cried over when you were small – only worse, oh much worse."<sup>5</sup>

### The Conjecture

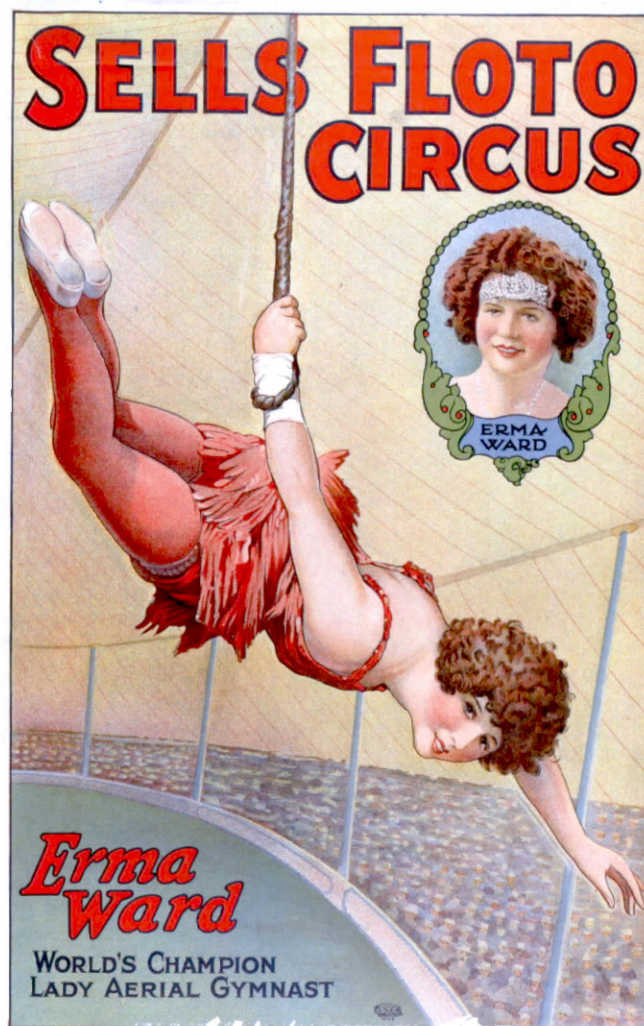
Let's approach this rivalry (pretending also that it possibly wasn't just a one sided affair) between Leitzel and Ward as a simple numbers battle, and the battlefield is the press. There's lots of copy given to the record breaking number of planges that each woman performed. Whether the records being broken are personal best and/or world records, it is rarely explicitly stated. Quite a lot of these numbers likely originate from circus-penned press books, of which the records are forgivingly fluid and change as needed.

Here's a simple chart of planges attributed to Leitzel and Ward between 1923 and 1931.<sup>6</sup> For each year, every attempt was made to find the highest reported number.

Year	Leitzel	Ward
1923	152*	225
1924	116*	235
1925	120	300*
1926	176	227
1927	200	150+
1928	194	200
1929	X	100
1930	63	X
1931	249*, 294*	150

\*Heralded as a record

All things considered, Erma's potentially fake numbers are consistently better than Leitzel's potentially fake numbers. Sells-Floto's advertising in 1925 claims that Erma's plange record was 300!<sup>7</sup> Wow! Curiously, however, Mabel Ward was reported to have "established a record" in 1931 of 300 planges in an article breaking the news item that she and Tom Mix were to marry.<sup>8</sup> One would think that Mabel, who was more often than not on the same show as Erma and doing the same kind of act, would know about Erma's monumental achievement of 300 one-arm-planges six years prior. For that matter, one would think that Leitzel



1924 Sells-Floto litho showing Erma Ward performing the one arm plange. The similarities between this litho and the 1921 RBBB Leitzel are obvious.

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zel would have acknowledged such an achievement by her rival, or done 301.

The plange wasn't the only aspect of Leitzel appropriated by Erma Ward. Much of how she was portrayed to the public was cribbed from what was said of Leitzel. Take for example the 1921 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey poster showing Dainty Miss Leitzel "World's Most Marvelous Lady Gymnast" by Strobridge Lithographing Company. It most certainly seems to be the inspiration for the 1924 Sells-Floto poster of Erma Ward "World Champion Lady Aerial Gymnast" by Erie Lithograph. Oft mentioned aspects of Leitzel's persona were incorporated into Erma's: the chauffeured luxury car,<sup>9</sup> the personal maid,<sup>10</sup> the impression of high culture by mentioning an interest and/or proficiency in music and the arts.<sup>11</sup> It seems that Erma



Ward was a cleverly marketed off-brand to Leitzel's name brand. When Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus purchased the American Circus Corporation after the 1929 circus season, the need for a Leitzel clone was unnecessary. Then tragedy struck.

The months following Leitzel's death in February of 1931 saw a number of performers scrambling to be considered her successor. An article in *Billboard* noted that "Rassana, aerialist, who closed last night at the Hippodrome, pulled off a stunt planned by the RKO publicity department Thursday night during her act. She went after a record of one-arm planges and got a count of 132. Claimed that she held the previous record of 110, while the late Lillian Leitzel is credited with 102."<sup>12</sup> Rassana was direct from Germany, and she had only just begun performing in North America shortly before the aforementioned stunt. She and RKO were obviously ignorant of the fact that Erma Ward had been stepping all over Leitzel's numbers for years. Where did they cook up Leitzel's record of 102? Rassana's vaudeville act was also reviewed in the same issue of *Billboard* that reported her record breaking performance, and there she only cranked out 16 planges.<sup>13</sup> In another strange turn, Mabel Ward was championed in the press as "taking up mantle of queen of the air that fell from the shoulders of the late Lillian Leitzel" in an article from May 1931, and it goes on to explain that "Miss Ward is a native of Bloomington, ILL, and was being schooled by Miss Leitzel to succeed (sic) to the title upon her retirement which was scheduled for this Fall. Miss Ward turns approximately 100 complete revolutions in the air at each performance."<sup>14</sup> Leitzel was going to retire in 1931? Where did that come from? A review that appeared in *Variety* of Mabel's act of this period gives a slightly more realistic and different take, "Mabel Ward is the solo aerialist with a routine akin to the late Lillian Leitzel's. Miss Ward is petite but lacks the showmanship. Her ring work is under par, but she is comparable in the planges. She threw her body about 100 times."<sup>15</sup> Janet May was described in 1932 by *Billboard* as being "one of a dozen or so girl aerialists who are doing the type of work made famous by the late Lillian Leitzel."<sup>16</sup> The review goes on to ding May for her lack of showmanship and the reviewer's perception that "her efforts to please are too obvious and the unnatural wide smile after each bit somehow combine to make the work seem forced, instead of free and easy." Janet May eventually wound up doing her version of what is inextricably called "a Leitzel act" on Hagenbeck-Wallace in 1937. She never beat anyone's record for planges. What of Erma in this sea of post-Leitzel planging? She briefly at-



*Erma Ward on the Tom Mix Circus, July 3, 1938. Note Erma's distinct image change in the post-Leitzel years. This uncharacteristically brassy photograph was taken by Sverre O. Braathen.*  
The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

tempted something novel in the form of a 6 girl stage act:

"Erma Ward at one time worked alone. Now she has five girls who go through a series of nifty ground acrobatics prior to her entrance for her handswings suspended in mid-air by one arm. Opening includes some corking individual stunts and gives a fast, effective buildup for Miss Ward's feat. Dressing of the girls adds to their appearance and is a relief from the customary circusy and gymnastic outfits. One of the girls announces that Miss Ward is the champion one-hand swing artist of the world and requests the audience to count the swings. Miss Ward had turned them up





Erma Ward in 1943 on the Clyde Beatty and Wallace Bros. Trained Wild Animal Circus. Photograph by Sverre O. Braathen.

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to 80 and was still swinging as the curtain dropped. All the girls were on for a ground finale.”<sup>17</sup>

Back on a circus, Erma’s 1934 stint on the Sam B. Dill Circus was heralded in July press pieces like “Texas Irma Ward beautiful flaming haired queen of the air”<sup>18</sup> and “The internationally distinguished Miss Ward is the holder of the diamond belt, signifying world supremacy on the Spanish Web and high rings.”<sup>19</sup> Another piece in the same month made an even loftier claim of Erma “(she) is not only the most daring of all aerialists, but also the most beautiful performer with any circus.”<sup>20</sup> First of all, “Texas Irma Ward” – that’s something the show seemed to tack on when playing Southern locales. There’s nothing “Texas” about Erma at all. The “diamond belt” (sometimes referred to as a “diamond studded belt”<sup>21</sup>) is another total mystery. Erma is also said to have been the recipient of the “Lillian Leitzel medal” as

early as 1934. No mention of a contest nor Erma Ward being involved in one that awarded a diamond studded belt to signify aerial dominance nor a Leitzel medal could be found. The *Billboard*/Circus Fans of America would eventually award a “Lillian Leitzel Memorial Medal” for the first time in 1939 to recipient, Mickey King as a result of The *Billboard* Performer Contest that was announced at the end of 1938<sup>22</sup>. The *Billboard* did report in a sneering article entitled “Leitzel Successor Stunt” set for 1932:

“New York, Oct. 8 – An exploitation stunt expected to gain wide public attention is that being mapped by RKO in connection with its Circus International, which after a break-in at the Prospect Theater, Brooklyn, invades the Palace for a week starting October 22. On the last night, October 28, there will be a contest which will bring forth RKO’s answer to the successor of Lillian Leitzel, an honor which has hung in the balance since the untimely death of the invincible one-arm plunger and aerialist. With Erma Ward part of the circus unit, which has been booked thru Boyd & Wirth, there will be guest kick-over artists that night in Janet May, Bee Starr and possibly Mickey (Gertrude) King. Persons familiar with the one-arm plange in all its phases will sit in as judges, and selection will be on the basis of form and endurance. Contest should afford great “copy” for the metropolitan press, since Leitzel was always, and still is, one of the most colorful “names” for newspaper desks.”<sup>23</sup>

Much to the contrary, very little “copy” was generated as a result of said “stunt.” Did RKO award a medal to Erma Ward? Did everyone involved get a medal for participation? Did each performer get a chance to receive that coveted medal on each’s appointed night during the weeklong engagement? It’s anyone’s guess.

### The Reality

Leitzel’s storied career is still very much alive in popular culture 85 years after the tragic 1931 fall in Copenhagen that resulted in her death. As a testament of her staying power, Dean Jensen’s well-received book *Queen of the Air* is, at present, listed as being in development at Warner Brothers as a major motion picture. Rumors of a powerhouse production team and an equally star-studded cast are swirling around the project.

As for Erma Ward? Her story up there on the big screen might yet be a little ways off... **BW**



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# The China Durbin family of Bloomington, Illinois

by Dorita Estes

Circus left many lasting marks on Bloomington, Illinois. Memories came from the growth of the flying return acts and the people they drew to and from Bloomington. One of those who came was a rigger named Carl "China" Durbin. Originally from Leitchfield, Kentucky – with a large Chinese letter tattooed on his forehead and others, just as mysterious, on his arms – he arrived in Bloomington to be a part of the Concello flyers in the 1930s and moved from the position of rigger to catcher before the decade was over.

Early records and oral testimony support the fact that Carl was born in Leitchfield either in 1909 or 1907. But he left home young to make a home on traveling shows. The details of the days from Leitchfield to Art Concello are unknown and China wanted to keep them that way. His age, too, was an enigma of the kind that goes with circus. He always said he was born in 1909, but preparing for a trip to France with Art and Antoinette Concello and Everett White in 1935, he realized that he would need a passport. He didn't even have a birth certificate. So with the aid of some friends they located a gentlemen who agreed for a fee to swear that he was China's uncle and that he was there when China was born. Unfortunately he swore that China was born in 1907. Whoops.

From as early as 1932, records show China was involved in the YMCA Circus in Bloomington, and often stayed in a boarding house on West Locust across the street from the Vasconcellos. The operator of the boarding house had a young daughter, Dorothy Hull, who was a waitress. Even though China was ten years older (or maybe twelve), Dorothy and China became friends and corre-



Early picture of China Durbin as catcher.

Author's collection

sponded while China was on the road. China moved on to better digs when he returned to Bloomington, including the downtown Tilden Hall Hotel and Dorothy took her skills as a waitress to the Post Office Cafe, down the street from the Bloomington YMCA. In 1939 China was playing parks and fairs with Tuffy Genders along with a variety of Concello flyers including Dude Rhodus. Grayce Genders was pregnant and therefore not on the road. The friendship continued and China and Dorothy were writing to each other daily. The letters were China's tool to teach Dorothy about life on the road. Many were about day-to-day challenges and disappointments. Often they touted the advantages of tent living, which China was doing, over the housecar that Tuffy had. They mentioned the people that visited includ-

ing Grayce Genders with her newborn son Curtis, named most likely for his mentor C. D. Curtis at the Bloomington YMCA. Others were Eva Mae and Joe Lewis, Grayce's sister and brother-in-law, who showed up whenever they needed help with their rigging. China also used the letters to advise Dorothy how to build up her strength to become a flyer. They also made it clear that a winter wedding was planned followed by a circus career for both of them.

When the winter of 1939 arrived, China and Dorothy made a trip to St. Louis and on December 2, 1939, the townner and the much older circus performer became husband and wife in a marriage that lasted for over 27 years ending at China's death in 1966. Dorothy was on her way from being a waitress to becoming a flyer.

They worked together on Ringling in 1940 and 1941 in Concello flying acts, going to Cuba in the winter of 1941.



When World War II broke out they were still in Cuba. With all the surface vessels redirected to the war effort, it looked like they might get to stay there. Finally they were able to book passage for themselves and their rigging on a just barely seaworthy boat to get back to the United States. There they learned that Dorothy was pregnant with their first child. China swore off of boat rides for the rest of his life.

Dorothy was back in Bloomington in 1942 while China was catching for one of Concello's flying acts on Ringling. Again there were daily letters and in July of 1942, Dorothy along with their new daughter, Dorita – named after Dorita Konyot to thank Mama Konyot for the kindnesses she had offered Dorothy when she was a First of May – returned to the show. But not for long. By 1943 China was working for "Papa Vas" (Art Concello's father, Art Vasconcellos) at the C & A shops in Bloomington in a war industry while the family was living in a rental house on Mulberry Street not far from there. It was just a short walk to the Vasconcellos home at 801 W. Locust Street – that is where the Durbin victory garden was. During the war years a second daughter, Ronna, was born. Dorothy kept both girls well-dressed in durable clothes made from C & A shop rags since they were more readily available than other fabric which was limited by war rationing. All the while Dorothy continued to practice aerial acts on backyard rigging China was able to build at the shops.

In late 1946, as the war was winding down, so was work at the railroad shops. China was undecided as to what he would do next. One of Dorothy's uncles was less than reassuring when he reminded China that his lack of formal education was unlikely to get him a job. China's reply was "I have a job" and immediately wired Art Concello for a job on the show. The return wire said "come-on" and five



*Early flying act picture probably 40 or 41. China Durbin, Billy Ward, Dorothy Durbin, RB&BB.*

*Author's collection*

days later the family was uprooted. China and Dorothy were on their way back to Ringling as generally useful. Soon they were both back working in flying acts.

In 1947, they took the act to Polack for Art Concello and then on to the winter dates. This was a difficult task as it required acquiring road equipment with shortages from the war still an issue. But with Art's Bloomington contacts – with auto dealers, the great Bloomington circus suppliers, and the resourcefulness of the Raycrafts – they acquired a brand new 1947 Chevrolet with a brand new 1946 engine and every gadget known to man at that time. They were able to couple it with a used twenty-foot

house trailer and they were off. What an adventure. Dorothy spent time getting familiar with this unusual car including several embarrassing minutes when she touched a gadget and water started shooting onto the windshield and the windshield wipers started working. Few had seen automatic windshield washers before and figuring out how to stop them was the problem. The adventures with the car and trailer included rolling it shortly after leaving, but the damage was minor. So they continued down the road with two adults, two young girls, a dented car, and trailer – all the necessities of a flying act – but no running water. They were also responsible for maintaining an accounting for Art. So on each date, China was paid for the act and then he paid those in the act and the act's expenses. The balance was wired to Art. They were proud they had negotiated a contract with Polack that paid them even if they couldn't work because of weather, and they were disappointed that they didn't benefit from it once during the year. With the changing politics on Ringling, by 1948, they left Polack Bros. (and the trials of self-provided road travel behind them) and were back on Ringling in Ring 1 as the Flying



Comets where they stayed until 1952.

The days on Ringling were busy ones. Besides catching a flying act, China was responsible for inspecting the rigging as it was hung each day and often assisted in setting up the rest of the show. As he only seemed satisfied when he was working, he took on others duties that varied from year to year. By the 1950s his day ran something like this: As soon as the third section (it had been the fourth section in 1950 and 1951 the change, which was blamed on superstition after the wreck scene in the movie, probably had more to do with economics), reached the show town or somewhere near there, he was off the train finding his way to the lot in the best way he could. Once there, if the flag was up for breakfast at the cookhouse (which had

arrived on the first section) he ate and then made himself generally useful by assisting in the show set up until it had progressed to the point he could hang the flying act rigging and make any repairs that were necessary. Once that was finished to his satisfaction, he moved to putting up the novelty joint in the connection between the menagerie and the main tent. Louie Blum (Louis Blumenthal) had that joint and China was his assistant. One of the things that was carried with the stand was a large water bottle of the kind that is used in dispensing machines. Pennies received went in that bottle which late in the year had to be moved mechanically because of its weight. At the end of the season, it got packed into the 1947 Chevrolet for the trip back to Bloomington as a gift from Louie to China's daughters.

Over the years China made himself useful in many other ways. Besides rigger, he worked as an usher, sold programs, and was responsible for taking wax impressions of the new crop of showgirls for the purpose of making iron jaw mouthpieces. He also ran an unofficial pawn shop for



*Flying Comets, RB&BB, 1948, Dorothy Durbin, Eddie Kohl, Joe Siegrist, China Durbin. (Note- Joe must not have stayed all year because he is not in the route book or it is a route book error.)*

Author's collection

those wanting to trade furs or jewelry or guns for cash, sometimes temporarily and sometimes permanently. The pawn shop was especially busy in the years after WWII when acts coming from Europe brought these items as their currency because the currency of their country was virtually worthless and moving it from country to country could be legally difficult.

By the time the novelty joint was up and flashed and China had all of his other ducks in a row, the flag was usually up at the cookhouse for lunch. Often Dorothy and the girls joined him there. Then it was time to think about preparing for the matinee. He found his Taylor trunk in the men's dressing room which contained all his personal show equip-

ment including tights, pumps, and leotards. His two water buckets were there and ready for him to take a show bath. His first performance responsibility usually was the aerial production number mid-point in the show where he sat web. Since web sitters wore long capes and ridiculous hats which were kept in the wardrobe tent, no real preparation was needed. The capes were all that the public saw, what was worn under the cape was at the option of the setter so if China chose, he could wear his flying act wardrobe under his cape. This wardrobe included matching cotton tights, dyed to match his leotard and pumps with sequins on the leotard and a matching sequined belt. All of this was maintained by Dorothy and kept in China's trunk. One exception was a beaded/sequined hat which was issued by the show, not appreciated much by the male performers, and usually "misplaced" early in the season. Again there was a glamorous cape that was picked up and returned to the wardrobe tent each show. Even though the costumes were similar for all of the flyers, it was easy to spot China when he was in



the air. Besides his ample size, at one time he had broken his ankle and because he was an impatient man, he didn't wait for it to fully heal before cutting off the cast with his pocket knife. So to find China, all you had to look for was the crooked ankle.

On multiple day stands and at all matinees, China was expected to reappear for finale in his flying act wardrobe. And there was time between shows to watch for the flag to go up at the cookhouse and join his family for dinner. After the second performance, if the show was moving that night, China changed into his show coveralls, had a cold beer from the G-top, and became Frank McClosky's assistant in getting the show off the lot. Then back to the train. Day after day from early morning until sometimes early the next morning, that was his life on the circus.

Dorothy's duties were less taxing. She was responsible for getting her two girls up and dressed and on the last show – provided bus to the lot – usually just in time to join China for lunch in the cookhouse. Then she located her spot in the girls' dressing rooms with her assigned two buckets of water, unpacked her trunk and handled any washing, dying, mending or costume making that needed to be done for the entire family. Bathing was also done at this time and often involved sending the girls after more buckets of water with a quarter in hand for each additional bucket. (Flying acts used lots of rosin and rosin turns black on costumes and is very difficult to get out, so it was important to have Renuzit on hand which had to be ordered by mail from Chicago since it was very effective in removing rosin. What a problem that would be today as Renuzit was flammable.) Since Dorothy was a Concello Flyer, and China's wife, her duties in the performance were limited to acting as a substitute



*Flying Comets RB&BB, 1949, Annie Robbins, Willie Robbins, Dorothy Durbin, China Durbin.*

*Author's collection*

in the aerial production number, working in the flying act, and doing finale on multiple-day stands. Since she was a female performer, her preparation for the show was more extensive than China's. She applied show make-up and hairpieces and wore a grouch bag in the small of her back, which is a fabric envelope attached to a strip of elastic with her valuables inside when she was high in the air. Like China, she also took on other jobs including selling ball pool tickets for the G-top. Even though she only sold to those on the show, it was still a form of illegal gambling in most states, so she was always looking over her shoulder. She also collected tips from the girls' dressing rooms for the men who moved the wooden chair frames from lot to lot. The chair fabric

went in the trunk. Her girls were busy too. She sent them out with Coca-Cola trays to go from girls' dressing room to girls' dressing room taking orders for the grease joint and running any other errands assigned for the tips that they earned.

After the second performance, Dorothy's tasks included rounding up her daughters, and catching the show bus back to the last section of the train and to their stateroom on the Louisville car. There she had a small two burner stove and space in a community refrigerator at the end of the car so she could prepare a late night snack for the family, including one to be reheated for China when he finally made it to the train. Next came crumming up the girls for bed in the upper berth. As housekeeping duties were handled by the train porter and did not fall to Dorothy, she had time to make a shopping list of items for the train car porter to pick up for her in the next town and a little personal time.

There were still "blue laws" in some states which prohibited showing on Sunday, and two or three times during





*Flying Comets, RB&BB, 1951, Del Graham, Babs Graham, Dorothy Durbin, China Durbin. Sverre O. Braathen photograph.*

Illinois State University Milner Library  
Special Collections.



*Flying Palacios, RB&BB, 1952, Dorothy Durbin, Raul Palacio, Jose Palacio, Lalo Palacio.*

Author's collection

the season, the show would have a Sunday off, but otherwise, every day was a work day and weather and lot conditions added special challenges.

Even though they were on the road most of the year, Bloomington was always their home and between seasons they could be found in the Emerson Street Barn and at the YMCA practicing, making nets and planning for the next season. But it was not all work. Parties were many and in addition to those at Skinny Benton's Grand Hotel, several were held at Dorothy's Mother's house at 104 Packard Street in the Stevensonville section of Bloomington setting at a big oak table that Dorita still has in her home in Sarasota, Florida. The showfolks in town along with circus loving towners often joined them including local chiropractors John and Mary Homer, Sam Stern, Ed Raycraft, and Harold Ramage among others. Food and libations flowed freely often including some of the Florida seafood that had been carefully carried back to Illinois in big metal milk cans. As the nights got later the stories got better and at one of these events mustard became the weapon of choice – leaving yel-

low stains were everywhere.

In preparing for the 1950 season, Del and Babs Graham joined the act to replace Willie and Annie Robbins, and since they were new to Concello flying, practice was needed. Where else for them to practice this new version of the Flying Comets but Bloomington-Normal at the Pop Horton Field House? Once again, Concello flyers were working in Bloomington/Normal.

By 1952, China had been selected to move up to the position of Assistant to Frank McClosky because he was getting a little old to catch a flying act. In ring 3 Dorothy joined the Flying Palacios, who had just arrived from Mexico without their sister, who was too young to get a permit. China then found himself back in Ring 1 catching as his replacement had to bow out because of a health problem.

When the 1952 season was over, so were their careers as flyers. They bought the New Deal Grocery at 1010 West Washington Street in Bloomington with the plan that Dorothy would run the store and China would return to the road as Assistant to McClosky. But the responsibilities of





Dorothy Durbin, China Durbin, New Deal Grocery.

Author's collection

the store made it necessary for him to return to Bloomington in the middle of 1953. Both of them transferred their circus work ethic to the business of running a small family grocery seven days a week from 9:00 AM to 9:00 PM with little assistance except from those in the family.

China's circus career was over unless you count designing hanging baskets to hold inventory using his past skills as a rigger. But not Dorothy's. Years later, in 1991, after the store had closed, China had died, and Dorothy had ended a successful career in the communications industry working with her younger daughter Ronna Sutton, she joined her older daughter Dorita and her son-in-law Walter Estes in Sarasota to go back on the road with Allan Hill's Great American Circus working in the ticket office.

Dorothy continued to split her time between Bloomington and Sarasota until her death on December 31, 1994, while participating in the annual Sarasota Circus Festival. She was returned to Bloomington to join China in Bloomington's Park Hill Cemetery. **Bw**



Dorothy Durbin, 1991, Great American Circus Ticket Wagon.

Author's collection

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- Carl Durbin death certificate, family possession.
- Baby book, Dorita Durbin Estes, family possession.
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- Park Hill Cemetery records, Bloomington, Illinois.



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The name and address of the publisher is Fred D. Pfening III, 1075 W Fifth Ave, Columbus OH 43212-2629.

The name and address of the editor and managing editor is Jennifer Lemmer Posey, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 5401 Bay Shore Rd, Sarasota FL 34243-2161.

The owner is Circus Historical Society, Inc; 1075 W Fifth Ave; Columbus OH 43212-2629. Known bondholders, mortgagees & other security holders owning 1% or more of total

bond, mortgages or other securities: none. Tax status has not changed during preceding 12 months.

Issue frequency is quarterly.

The average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months is (a) Total copies printed: 720; (b1) Mailed outside-county paid subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies): 590. (b3) Paid distribution outside the mails including sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales, and other paid distribution outside USPS: 40. (b4) Paid distribution by other classes of mail through USPS (first class): 31. (c) Total paid distribution: 661. (f) Total distribution: 661. (g) Copies not distributed: 59. (h) Total: 720. (i) Percent paid: 100%.

Number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date is (a) Total copies printed: 700. (b1) Mailed outside-county paid subscriptions slated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies): 572. (b3) Paid distribution outside the mails including sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales, and other paid distribution outside USPS: 35. (b4) Paid distribution by other classes of mail through USPS (first class): 31. (c) Total paid distribution: 638. (f) Total distribution: 638. (g) Copies not distributed: 62. (h) Total: 700. (i) Percent paid: 100%.

I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

(Signed by) Martha Roth Wells, 9/30/16



Note: this photograph was taken by Kim Sue at the Bertini family snake photo booth at the Hanneford Circus in Dayton, Ohio. It's an annual tradition.



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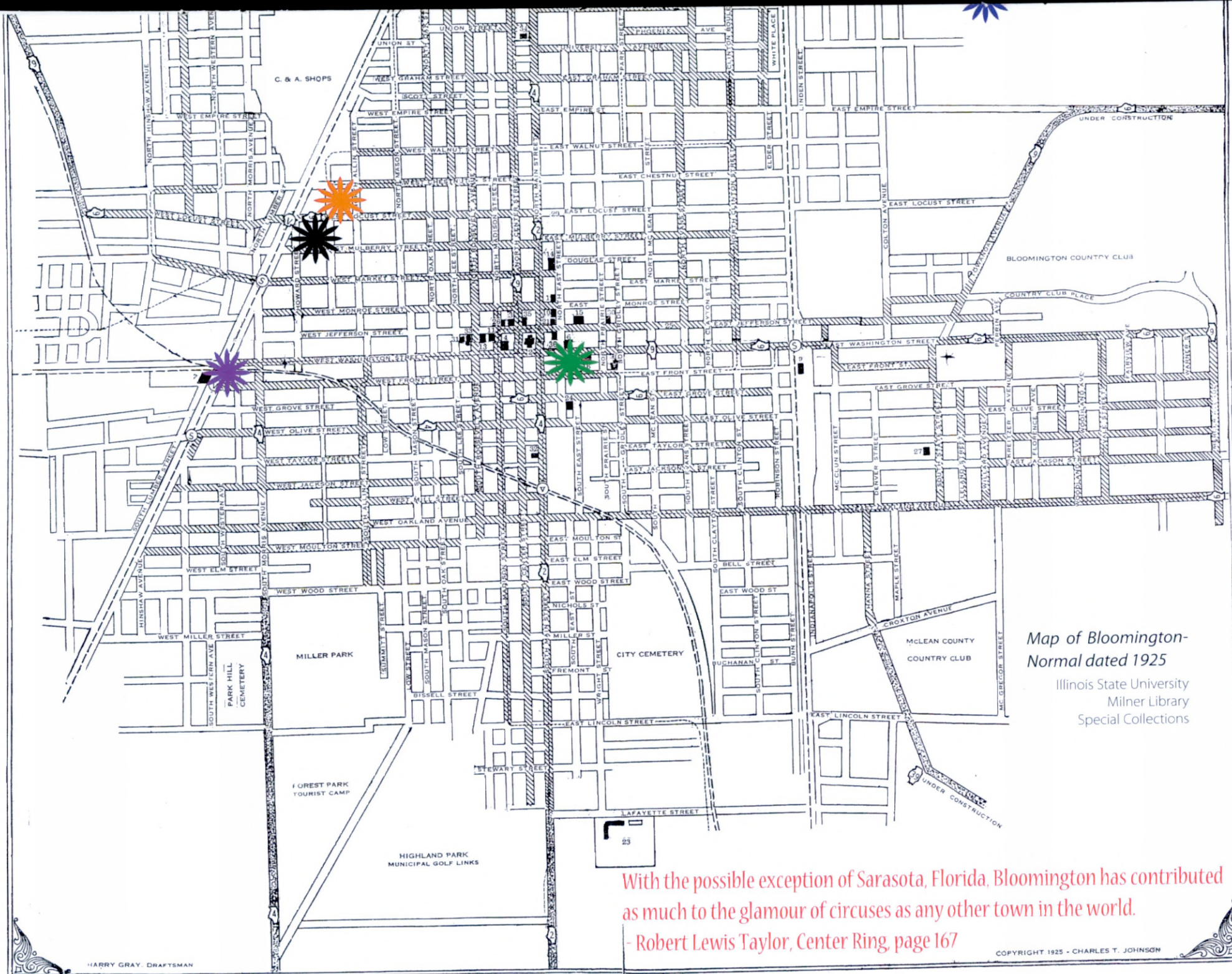
MOTOR GUIDE MAP OF  
**Normal, Ill.**

- (V) Viaduct  
 (S) Subway  
 Electric Railways -----  
 Steam Railways -----  
 Paved Streets   
 State Highways 

MOTOR GUIDE MAP OF  
Bloomington  
Illinois

- |            |                         |
|------------|-------------------------|
| Black      | Durbin residence        |
| Light Blue | ISNU                    |
| Purple     | New Deal Grocery        |
| Orange     | Vasconcellos residence  |
| Red        | Valentine training barn |
| Dark Blue  | Ward/Concello barn      |
| Green      | YMCA                    |





Map of Bloomington-  
Normal dated 1925

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With the possible exception of Sarasota, Florida, Bloomington has contributed  
as much to the glamour of circuses as any other town in the world.  
- Robert Lewis Taylor, Center Ring, page 167



# The Valentine Family of Flyers

of Bloomington, Illinois

## Brothers George, Bill, Fred, and Roy

By Cherie Valentine



The Valentine family: Roy, Fred, Bill, Charles, George, Geraldine, and Lillian.

Author's collection



George Washington Valentine and Lillian Richards could not speak or hear. They met at a special school in Jacksonville, Illinois, married, and eventually moved to a house at 1401 Eastholme Avenue in Bloomington where they raised eight children. I find it remarkable that four of their children grew up to thrill thousands on the flying trapeze! What follows are the stories of those four boys who did just that.

George was born in 1898, Bill in 1907, Fred in 1910 and Roy, the youngest, was born in 1912. When The Great War erupted, brothers George and Chuck joined the Army and were sent to Texas and then George was sent to France. A year later, Chuck joined him there. They returned at the end of the war and I believe Chuck decided to stay in Texas. By 1924, the two eldest sons were working as molders at the same place as their father, the Hayes-Custer Stove Company. A little article in the *Pantagraph* dated August 29, 1925 states that Charles Valentine of Houston was in Bloomington visiting his parents who had not seen him since the close of the war.<sup>1</sup> It also said that his brother Willie (Bill) would return with him to Houston. Chuck must have been the reason his brothers eventually went to Houston to live. The weather there certainly would have been good for practicing their acts outdoors. On September 8, 1928, Glendora Ross of Normal became the bride of William in Eureka. They were attended by his parents.<sup>2</sup>

By 1929, their parents had a full house living with them. The city directory showed Fred, George, Roy and William living at the old farmstead. In addition, Bill and his wife, Glendora, and their little boy, Billy Glen, lived there too. It was a small house – with nearby field space necessary for their rigging – that is still there today. What memories they must have had growing up there! But after living at the Eastholme house for nearly twenty years, their parents moved to Houston around 1935. The brothers frequently returned to Bloomington to visit their friends and family.

George was the first brother who wanted to learn how to fly. He went to the YMCA to watch the performers there,



George and Fred Valentine performed with Paul and Nellie Sullivan in 1929 as *The Flying Sullivans*.

Author's collection

as the YMCA was the place to practice for all the circus performers that lived in Bloomington, and they all put on a wonderful circus for the community once a year. Harry LaMar taught George how to be the catcher. A small September 16 *Pantagraph* article substantiates George's new role with the Five Flying LaMars as his parents motored to the Tuscola, Illinois Fair to witness the aerial performance with George as their new catcher.<sup>3</sup>

Lorraine said in her 1985 interview with Steve Gossard that she thought Paul Sullivan taught Fred to fly. And then George taught Bill to catch, and later, Roy to fly.<sup>4</sup> I finally found proof that George and Fred were together with the Flying Sullivans. A June 12, 1929 article from the *Rochester, New York Democrat and Chronicle* newspaper said, "The Flying Sullivans will be headliners for the opening week.



They are Nellie, Paul, Fred and George Sullivan.”<sup>5</sup> How great a find is that?

### 1930s – The Valentinos, The Valentines and The Romas

Art Concello asked George to be his catcher and join him and his wife, Antoinette, for the 1930 season. A small article in the January 26, 1930 edition of the *Pantagraph* made note of the three-person act’s departure for play for Shrine shows.<sup>6</sup> Later in the year, the act joined the Robbins Bros. Circus. The June 6<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Plainsman* newspaper in Huron, South Dakota said, “One of the most sensational acts with the big show is the Aerial Concellos in a daring flying trapeze number in which Arthur does a double and triple twister somersaults to a flying catch by George, his brother, in the very dome of the big top.”<sup>7</sup> Well, George had been a Sullivan, so why not a Concello now?



Senior Alfredo Valentine looking like he was going into Spec-1931, Puerto Rico.

Author's collection

In 1930, George was listed as an acrobat in the city directory. By 1932, Fred was still at home and listed as an aerialist. The last year the family was in Bloomington, 1934, Fred was at home, and Bill too, but Bill was listed as a mold-er. By 1935, they had all moved away – to Houston.

Lorraine Mather met George outside the YMCA when she had just graduated from high school. He was looking to start his own flying act, and she was willing and eager to learn how to fly after watching the young ladies who practiced there. While she was learning along with George, Roy and Fred, Fred told George that he didn't think Lorraine would ever make a flyer. She would prove him wrong.

A photo album of Fred's tells in pictures what he was doing in 1931. He, and Bloomington catcher, Bennie Gibson, left for South America from New York on March 19 and arrived in San Juan on 23 March. Luckily, someone noted dates and descriptions on the back of the photos. One photo shows Fred in a costume with a dog – like he was going into Spec. The date given for that photo is April 5 and the place is San Juan. Another photo says, “Humberto Urico, flying act catcher.”

A May 12<sup>th</sup> photo is of Fred and Bennie, and says, “Taken aboard the steamship ‘Caracus’ on the way to Venezuela from San Juan.” In mid-June 1931 they played Puerto Cabello and in July, they were performing in Domingo City, Republica Dominicana, West Indies Island. An August 10<sup>th</sup> photo says, “Myself (Fred) on a circus train going to Puerto Plata from Santiago, Republica Dominicana.” In mid-August they were performing in Port au Prince, Haiti, and someone wrote, “Sr. Alfredo,” on the back of the photo of him and Bennie. In October, they performed in Santiago de Cuba, Santa Clara, Camaquey, and Havana.<sup>8</sup>

In 1932, Fred is listed in the Bloomington City Directory as an “aerialist,” and was living at the old homestead on Eastholme Street with his folks. A photo in the January 17, 1932 *Pantagraph* showed Fred, Bennie Gibson and a native clown in Santa Domingo. The article was announcing that Fred and Bennie had returned from an eight month tour of the West Indies with the Dunbar-Schweyer Circus.<sup>9</sup> Fred's address was listed as his parent's home and Bennie lived at 713 W. Front St.

Steve asked Lorraine in their interview, “You said Art wanted George in 1932 because he was the best catcher in the business.” Lorraine answered, “Yes, and that was going to be his first year on the Ringling show. Of course, he had been on other circuses, but they were going to be on the Ringling show. They were next to the Codonas, with Codonas in the middle. Art wanted to be sure and have a good





Bennie Gibson, Jessie Fontaine, Freddie Valentine in Port au Prince, Haiti, 1931 on the circus grounds.

Author's collection

act because he was doing his triple, so he had George go with him."

Lorraine wasn't exactly ready to perform on the flying trapeze in 1933, so George asked Tuffy and Grayci Genders to join the act. Lorraine said in her interview with Steve Gossard, "I was scared to death that first year. We had our opening date in Aberdeen, South Dakota in 1933. I did a single trapeze act, just a little act to use as a second act. Then I could practice during the summer to get used to flying."<sup>10</sup> After the fair season they joined the Seils-Sterling Circus, opening in Lebanon, Tennessee the first week in September.<sup>11</sup>

Fred and Roy were performing in the same act and getting outstanding reviews like that which appeared in Canada's *Ottawa Journal* on August 22, 1933: "Winter Garden Revue is Great Feature. The Central Canada Exhibition was hailed as outstanding. Flying trapeze work was daringly ex-

ecuted by a group of aerial performers, the Valentines – the 'Fearless Flyers' – whose agility on the trapeze kept everyone in suspense."<sup>12</sup>

The *Pantagraph* reported on August 31, 1933 that the Flying Valentines, "troupe No. 1," would go to a national exhibition in Toronto for two weeks after closing in Ottawa. It was noted that the troupe consisted of "Alfred and Roy Valentine, sons of Mr. and Mrs. George Valentine, and Henry 'Hank' Robbins, all of Bloomington. Following their dates in Canada, they plan to start a tour of the fairs in the east."<sup>13</sup>

There is a photo in Fred's photo album that I have that shows Fred and Roy standing next to a wooden wagon from Ottawa, Canada and painted on the wagon is "Flying Valentino's, Bloomington, Illinois No. 1" I wonder who had the number two troupe?

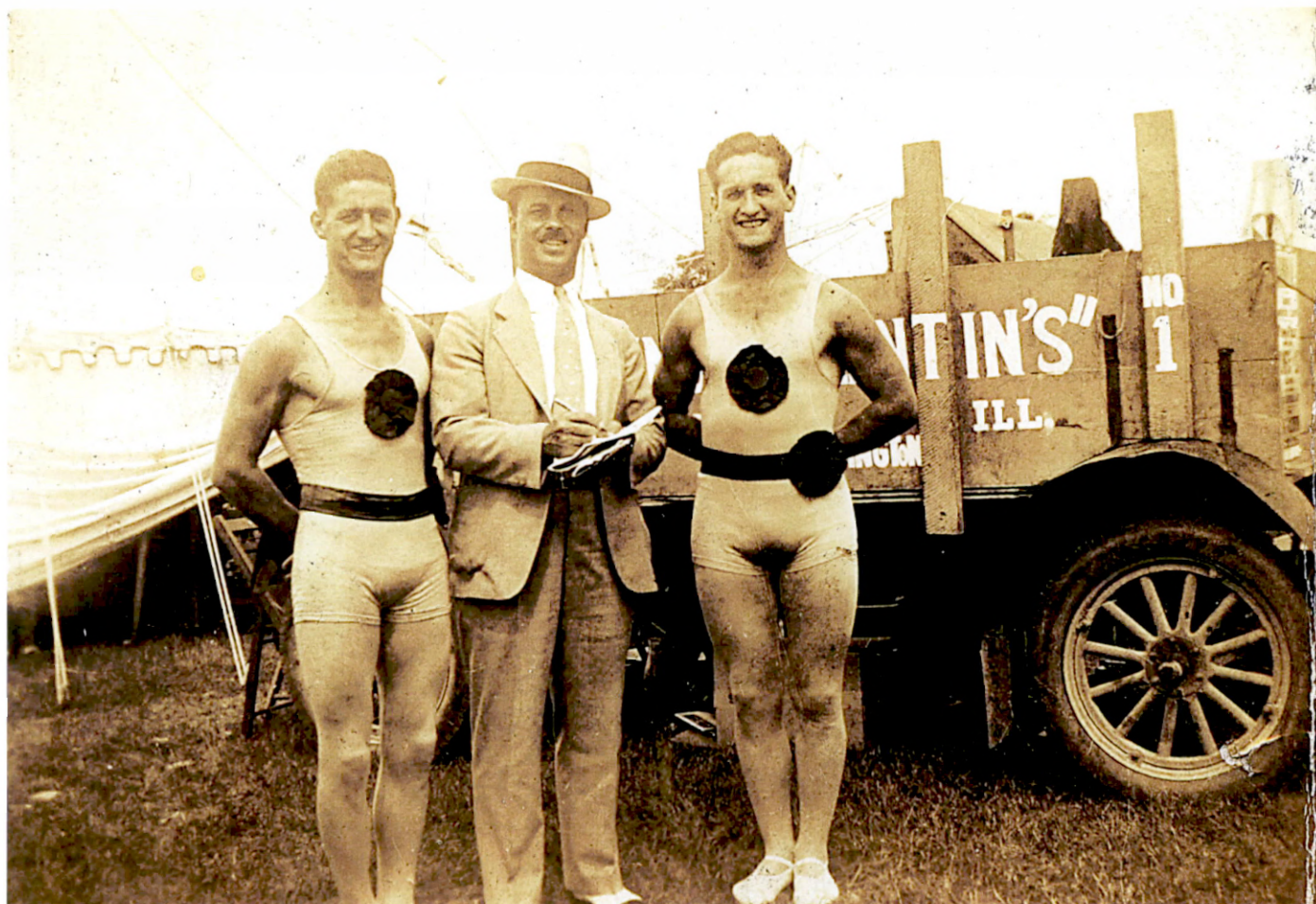
In 1935, Fred was performing with George and Lorraine. The press praised their work with pieces that read like this: "Trapeze Artists to Thrill Hearne Public: The Flying Valentino trapeze team to be seen here in the Great United Shows, May 27-June 1, are expected to thrill audiences with their daring feats. Recognized as being the most wonderful artists on the circuit, the three artists, Mr. and Mrs. Valentino and a young brother (Fred) of Mr. Valentino, put on a 'hair raising' show each night at 10:15 in addition to a free show. Mrs. Valentino who has won for herself the name of 'Mrs. Take-a-chance Valentino,' in her part of the death defying act, is only 20 years of age."<sup>14</sup>

A small 1935 article in Lorraine's scrapbook says, "The Flying Valentinos, management of George Valentine, one of the performers, others including Lorraine Mather, and Alfred and Roy Valentine, are the free attraction with the Greater United Shows, opening at Corpus Christi."<sup>15</sup>

My cousin, Barbara Mather Black, sent me some photos of a very young Lorraine taken in mid-August 1935 in Davenport, Iowa. Lorraine's parents, George and Agnes Mather, and Barbara travelled there from Bloomington to visit with Lorraine and the photos were taken. They were playing the Mississippi Valley Fair and Expo. On September 19<sup>th</sup>, George and Lorraine went to Peoria to get married. They then left right away to travel to Abilene, Kansas for the Central Kansas Free Fair, starting September 21<sup>st</sup>. That sounds like a nice honeymoon destination.

In 1935, the Valentinos acquired a new flyer for their act. Sue Peltó recalled in her 1974 interview with the *ISU Vidette*, "I first became interested in trapeze work because I had always been athletic. I was born and raised in Minnesota and did a lot of speed skating and swimming. One





Fred, Roy and unknown man in Ottawa, Canada with the "Flying Valentin's" No. 1 wagon. Who had the second troupe?

Author's collection

year, I even won the Northwestern Speed Skating Championship." While she was in Houston, George and Lorraine observed her skill in swimming and diving and asked her to join their act, and the rest is history!

Fred started the 1936 season in Corpus Christi on April 14. At the end of April, they performed for the Centennial Regatta with the Big State Shows in Freeport, Texas, with Roy and Hank Robbins. I have a photo from Freeport and they have a big, spangled "V" on their costumes. Perhaps Bill took the photo. He wrote on the top of it, "The Genial Gentlemen of the Air" and sent it to his brother George.

In July, Fred was performing in Corsicana, Texas for the Mardi Gras Fiesta. There was a note in the November 7, 1936 issue of *Billboard* which told readers the weather there was rainy and cold and consequently, business was way off. But all the news wasn't bad, "Hank Robbins, catcher, of the Flying Valentines, quit to go to Houston. His wife was in the hospital and gave birth to a 7 pound boy. Francis Reiner, of Ringling's Concello troupe, took Hank's place.

Freddie went to his home in Houston to celebrate the 65<sup>th</sup> birthday of his father, George Washington Valentine."<sup>16</sup> A week later *Billboard* reported that Roy and Freddie were in Houston along with Francis Reiner, for a brief rest, after closing with the Big State Shows as their free act.

Lorraine's program collection includes one from Des Moines dated mid-April 1936 for the Za-Ga-Zig Shrine Circus in the Coliseum. General admission was only forty cents. Rink Wright was the Equestrian Director. He would go on to present his Omaha Shrine Circus where the Flying Valentinos would perform for many years.

Display 16 of the Omaha Shrine Circus had four aerial acts and one was La Valentine Sisters, Muscle Whirls. The Valentinos performed in Display 25. A small article in Lorraine's scrapbook says, "The Flying Valentinos (George and Lorraine Valentine, Jerry Peltó (Sue), and Oscar Jordan) played the Des Moines Shrine Circus and this week are at the St. Louis Police Circus. They will tour the East, playing celebrations, parks and fairs. They are traveling in a new





Fred, Hank Robbins, and Roy at Freeport, Texas Regatta, May 3, 1936.

Author's collection

V-8 car and truck. George has two younger brothers, Freddie and Roy, who have a flying act known as the Flying Valentines on the Big State Shows."

An ad for the South Texas Exposition in the Corpus Christi *Caller-Times* paper April 13, 1937, drew attention to the Flying Valentines as the feature act<sup>17</sup> and December 18, 1937 *Billboard* note stated, "The Original Flying Valentines, managed by Roy G. and Freddie Valentine, have completed 36 weeks during the outdoor season and closed with the Hamid-Morton Circus in Houston November 6. Then they go to the Elk's Thrill Circus in San Antonio in mid-December. The troupe consisted of three brothers and a sister-in-law."<sup>18</sup> That would have been Roy, Freddie, Bill, and Mary. I know Freddie and Bill's wives did not perform in the flying act.

In 1937, the Valentinos worked for Howard Bros. Shows from March until July 31. Then they started playing their fair season. Freddie was working with them then.

An August 24, 1937 issue of the Worthington, Minnesota *Daily Times* had the headline, "Flying Valentinos Bolster Fast-Moving Fair Show." But the article went on to say that the "most spectacular act on the bill" was unable to appear. The reason was based in geography.

Booked at the end of a 450-mile jump, the Valentinos simply did not arrive in time to erect their elaborate gear, some of which towered forty feet in the air. "However, they were on hand this afternoon for the remainder of the fair to thrill those attending in what was expected to be the greatest crowd of the three days."<sup>19</sup>

On the same page of the newspaper was the headline, "Fair Show Talent Guests of Kiwanis Club." That article stated, "Freddie Valentine of the Flying Valentinos and Harry Milner, manager of the Six Skating Marvels, who were guests at today's luncheon, favored the members with interesting stories from their daily work. Freddie informed the Kiwanians it takes about five years of strenuous work to fit a man for the aerial spectacle, but the occupation is plentifully besprinkled with oldsters who are still going strong. One man recently left their act at 73 years of age, and on the Hagenbeck Circus there is a trapeze performer 64 years old, working every day."

In March 1938, three of the brothers were performing together as the Valentine's Sensational Flyers, along with Mary Atterbury. They opened with the Texas Longhorn Shows in Carthage and through the spring played many Texas towns. Soon after, they journeyed to the Dutch West Indies to perform for the Gran Circo Emil Schweyer.

(Ancestry.com has a passenger list for the S. S. Santa Rosa that sailed from New York August 5, 1938 and arrived August 9<sup>th</sup> in Curacao, Venezuela. The third class passengers included Mary Atterbury, 21, born February 8, 1917 in Beatrice, Nebraska; Roy Valentine, 25, born October 22, 1912 in Bloomington; Fred Valentine, 28, born March 14, 1910 in Bloomington; William Valentine, 30, born October 15, 1907 in Bloomington, and Paul Gottschalk, 48, born October 24, 1889 in Germany and naturalized in 1918. They returned to the port of New York at 8:45 a.m. on August 22<sup>nd</sup>.)

A note in an August 1938 *Billboard* said the American acts with the circus were Lamont's Cockatoos, Frank Shepard, the Oliver Sisters, and the Flying Valentines.<sup>20</sup> The September 10, 1938 *Billboard* issue had a little note, "Valentine's Sensational Flyers returned to the States August 22 from the Dutch West Indies and are now playing fairs and celebrations. They picked up their cars and trailer at Bloomington, Illinois."<sup>21</sup>





Sue Peltó, Oscar Jordan, George and Lorraine Valentine.

Author's collection

Roy and Mary left Fred and Bill at this point. Roy reported in the September 24, 1938 *Billboard*, "Roy G. Valentine advises that he and Mary Atterbury, of the Flying Valentines, have formed a double trapeze act for fairs and circuses. Miss Atterbury was formerly of the Atterbury Duo act and Atterbury Bros. Circus. The new act has been named the Aerial Romas. They opened the indoor season with Polack Bros. Circus at Rochester, Minnesota."

For the 1939 season, Fred called the act "Valentine's Sensational Flyers." In March and April, they performed in Texas and Arkansas with the John R. Ward Shows. Around May 6<sup>th</sup>, the act was performing in Humboldt, Tennessee. During June, they worked for the Happyland Shows

throughout Michigan. They performed in Elkhart, Indiana after July 4<sup>th</sup>, then went to Battle Creek and Detroit. They played Fergus Falls, Minnesota during Labor Day week and the rest of the season was spent in Kansas and Oklahoma. Freddie was listed as the owner of the act, brother Bill was the catcher, and their leaper was Gus Higginbotham.

Meanwhile Roy and Mary performed as both the Aerial Romas, a double trapeze act, and the Flying Romas. Throughout the years, Roy regularly posted his routes in *Billboard*. They opened in February at the St. Paul Shrine Circus, worked the Omaha Shrine Circus for Rink Wright, plus the Shrine Circuses in Buffalo, New York, and Pittsburgh. After closing in Hershey, Pennsylvania with the Hamid-Morton Circus, they joined Mary's family circus for fair dates in Iowa and Minnesota.

In June, they appeared in Michigan and then they performed at the West Point, Nebraska Fair followed by the Labor Day Celebration in Clinton, Iowa. Come October, they performed at the Shrine Circus in

Toronto for Bob Morton. The next month, they traveled to Baltimore for the Hamid-Morton Shrine Circus at the Armory, performed in Philadelphia and closed the season November 25<sup>th</sup> in Boston.

The Flying Valentinos opened their 1939 season in Crystal City, Texas with the Western State Shows. They played cities in Texas through mid-April and then traveled northward through Kansas, Illinois, Michigan. By mid-June they were in Parkers Landing, Pennsylvania. At the end of July, they were playing one of their favorite towns, Russell Springs, Kentucky.<sup>22</sup>

Sue Peltó, said in the 1985 interview with Steve Gossard, "There was one place we played – Russell Springs – a place



you would never heard of even. When you went in there, there was only one building, a post office, store, and everything together. And we thought, where in the world were they going to get the money to pay us! But you'd never seen so many people." Lorraine commented, "They came down out of the hills." Sue remembered, "It was just packed out there and from then on, they wanted us every year, for a long time."<sup>23</sup>

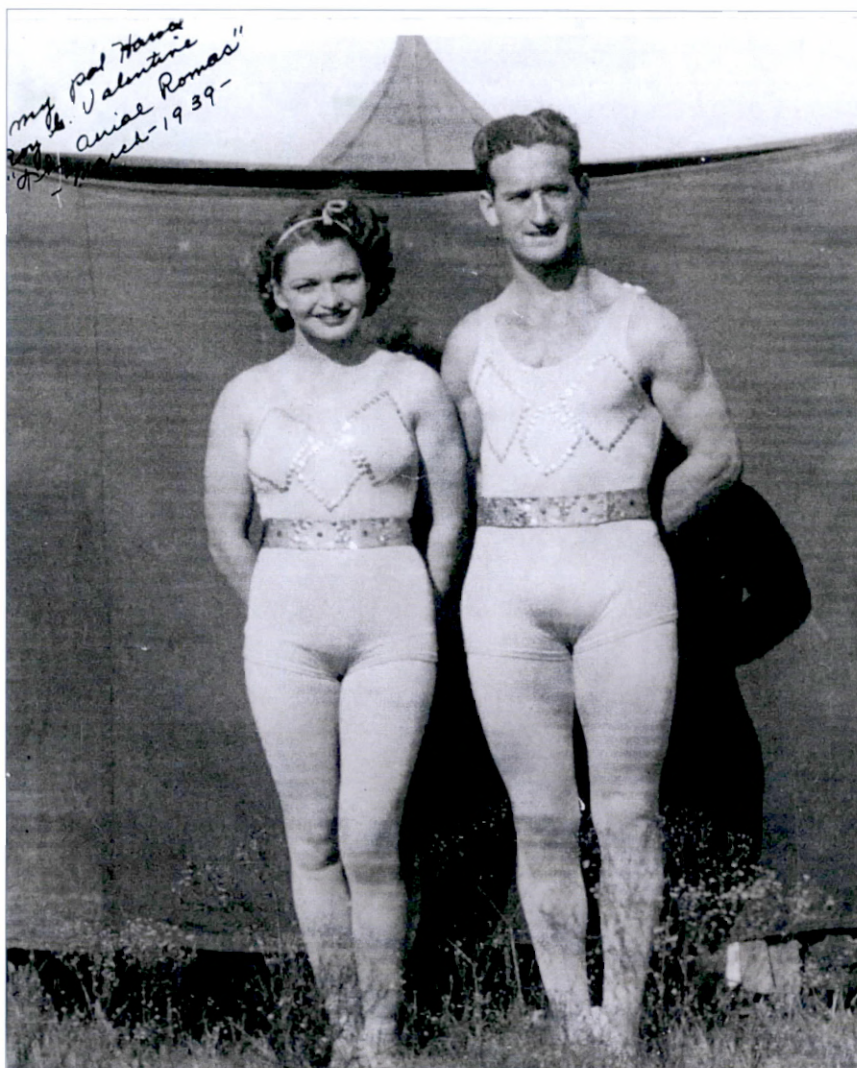
November 6<sup>th</sup> they performed at 10 P.M. in Greenville, Mississippi with the West Bros. Shows for the Woodmen of the World. There was a nice photo of them doing the passing trick and an article in the Delta Democrat Times newspaper before the show arrived<sup>24</sup>. Evelyn Radford left the act in 1939, and so when their contract called for four people, they brought in the very pretty Belle Roberts. They closed their season November 25<sup>th</sup> in Houston at the Buffalo Stadium for the Arabia Shrine.<sup>25</sup>

At the end of 1939, the Flying Valentinos won the *Billboard* Magazine's poll for the Best Flying Act. Gossard asked Lorraine and Sue in their interview, "How did they come to choose you?" Lorraine answered, "By votes – people sent in votes. We received more votes than any other flying act – it was like a poll. The performers and people that got the *Billboard* could vote. There were many categories. We would be working on a carnival as a free act, at the back end of the carnival – to hold the people there – and we would say, 'Hey, be sure and send in your *Billboard* coupon. The best act – you know who it is, don't you?' That's about the way it was won."<sup>26</sup> Their beautiful award hangs in my living room.

### 1940s

In the 1940 census, Bill was widowed and living at his home at 1306 N. Shepherd Drive in Houston. His occupation was an aerialist in professional show business. He stated he worked 48 weeks in 1939, with an income of \$1200. He was 32 years of age and living in his home was son, Billy Glen, age 11, and an aerialist from North Carolina lodging with them named Donald Mozingo, age 25, who probably was a flyer in his act.

Fred was listed in the census as living in his home also



*The Aerial Romas – Roy and Mary Valentine, 1939*

Author's collection

on N. Shepherd Drive. His occupation was the same as Bill's, aerialist. In 1939, Fred worked 30 weeks. Bill had said his native language was English, but Fred said his native language was "degh dumb" which means deaf and dumb and that would describe his parents. Fred was 30 years old, his wife Elizabeth T. was 29, sons Fred M. Valentine, 6, and Charles J. was 5 years old.

In that year, 1940, Fred and Bill's act played at Meyers Lake Park in Massillon, Ohio. The July 19, 1940 issue of the *Bloomington Pantagraph* had a little note, "Billy Valentine of Houston is here to visit his grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Ross. His father, Bill Valentine, who is a member of the aerial troupe of Flying Valentines who have been playing in Nebraska, brought Billy to Normal while en route to Taylorville where the troupe has a two week engagement."<sup>27</sup>

In September they were working for the Eric B. Hyde



Shows in Pennsylvania, and later moved on to the Idlewild Park in Ligonier, Pennsylvania where Bill met a young lady who was working a photo booth on the carnival, Doris Kee. They soon were married and her son, Raymond, who had the nickname, "Slick," was quickly learning the flying trapeze and working with his new stepfather.

Roy and Mary appeared for the Cotton Festival in Dyersburg, Tennessee, and by October they worked for Woodman Wonder Shows in Waco, Texas. At the end of the season, they worked for the Arabia Temple Shrine Circus in Houston. Roy, never shy about sharing news, wrote to the *Billboard* in November that they bought a new car at the end of the season, and they were going to winter in San Antonio.

The Flying Valentinos opened the 1940 season at the St. Louis Shrine Circus at the Coliseum. Also on the program were the Flying Behees and the Flying Comets. By September they were with the Gold Medal Shows, closing the season in Alabama.<sup>28</sup>

Fred and Bill were performing their act on fairs and circuses for the 1941 season. Roy's act started the season in February at Sweetwater, Texas with the T. J. Tidwell Shows, with Pat and Wayne Bowers, and Mary. An article in the Abilene, Texas *Reporter-News* March 16, 1941 said, "The Tidwell Shows present the Flying Romas, sensational free act, performing thrilling feats at a dazzling height." In April, after Carlsbad, New Mexico, they added Roland Marquis, of the Casting Campbells, and then played thirteen weeks with the Byers Brothers Shows.

In May and June, they were performing with the Grand Union Show in New Mexico and Oklahoma. They were very busy August through November playing in Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Iowa, Ohio, Florida and Georgia, where they closed their season after 45 weeks of performing.

The Valentinos opened their 1941 season in Omaha at the Auditorium for Rink Wright and the Tangier Shrine Circus. Steve Gossard asked Lorraine to tell her favorite story about Omaha and her accident. She recalled, "I missed my 2½ and then I got up and did it over again, and by that time, my neck was terrible. So George went to this one Shriner and said, "Where can I find a good chiropractor? The Shriner said, "I know a good one." So he goes to the phone and calls him at 11 at night. So, we get over there and he had some man in his office and of course, he didn't know who we were. The doctor said, "You'll have to wait just a minute. I have a man here I have to work on. He had a heart attack. He was at the circus and a girl fell and gave him a heart attack." And George said, "Well, this is the girl

that fell!"<sup>29</sup> She loved to tell that story.

From June 23-29, they performed at Flint Park in Flint, Michigan. Lorraine fell from the rope-ladder, cut her knee and back, and required 22 stitches. An article from the *Daily Free Press* in the Streator, Illinois newspaper provided the details of the aftermath, "She has since been incapacitated and in her place during the performance here, will be a young woman artist out of Bloomington. During their stay in Streator, the troupe are guests of Andy Bakalar."<sup>30</sup> They stayed with Andy for two weeks, and practiced daily, and left there for Wyoming, Illinois where they were featured on a four-day festival program.<sup>31</sup>

1941 wasn't a good year for the Valentinos. Back in Russell Springs, Kentucky, Lorraine broke some of George's ribs! She recalled in Steve's interview, "I was doing the 2½. See, if you are on a hill and you're flying up here and the catcher is up there, although the rigging is level, you've got gravity to pull you down the hill. Well, we were on this hill, and I had done something wrong – doing the 2½ – and it was off time, and George didn't want me to drop into the net, so I went – and bam – right into him.



Bill, Fred and unidentified, *The Flying Valentinos*.

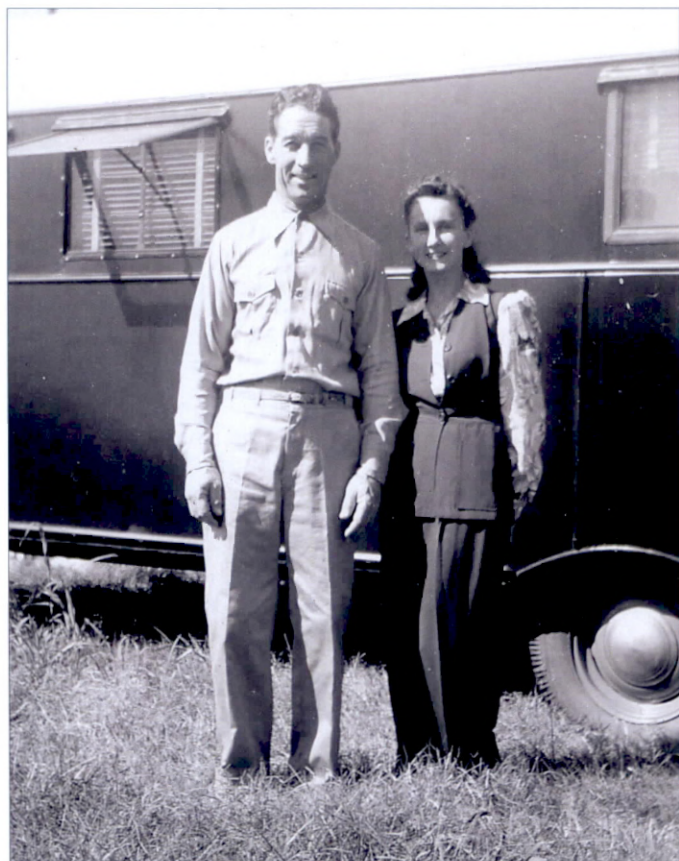
Author's collection



"So he taped himself up and worked. I don't know how he did it with broken ribs. And then, from there, we had to go to Campbellsville, Kentucky. And George said, 'I can't work every show.' It was murder! You can imagine hanging down, catching every trick with broken ribs. And so the management said, 'Can you manage to do one show a day?' So we did until George's broken ribs got better."<sup>32</sup>

Fred Valentine and his Flying Valentines appeared in late April 1942 in Dalton, Georgia at the Ball Park for Scott's Expo Shows. In mid-May, they worked at Belmont Park in Montreal at the Shrine Circus. In late July, they were in Bedford, Indiana with Geren's United Shows.<sup>33</sup> Bill was probably still working in Fred's act.

The Flying Romas played Missouri for the first ten days of April for the Al Baysinger Shows for Popular Bluff's American Legion Celebration. In the flying act were Dave Abbott, William Atterbury, Roy and Mary. The May 9, 1942 *Billboard* reported, "This year a 10-cent gate is used with the Flying Romas, under the direction of Roy Valentine presenting the Free Act. Roy reported they have the best line-up of dates in their career."<sup>34</sup>



George and Lorraine by their trailer in Marshall, TX, September 22, 1942 – taken while they were playing the Central East Texas Fair.

Author's collection

They worked in Illinois through June with this carnival. In late June, they performed with the L. J. Heth Shows as their Free Act in Connersville, Indiana, July 1-4 for the American Legion Post Celebration. Wayne Bowers was their catcher. They stayed with the L. J. Heth Shows through October (November 7, 1942, *Billboard* shared news of an October birthday party for Roy in his trailer), and closed the season in late December in Bossier City, Louisiana.

The Valentinos opened their 1942 season in Hinesville, Georgia with the Mighty Monarch Shows, and then traveled to Charleston's Navy Yard Station to perform before going to Virginia and West Virginia. In Man, West Virginia, George and Fred worked their acts on the same program. By mid-July, they were with the Bill Hames Shows in Leonard, Texas.<sup>35</sup> They continued playing mostly fairs throughout Texas but closed in Houston for their Shrine Circus.<sup>36</sup>

By 1943, Bill was still working with Fred. The September 4, 1943 issue of *Billboard* laid out his spectacular scheduling feat: "Bill Valentine, catcher for the Original Flying Valentines, cards that he recently caught for two flying acts during the same week. After catching for Charlie Siegrist's act at Fort William, he worked the Valentine's act at the Delphi, Indiana Fair; to Fort Wayne Indiana for The Picnic, then back to the Valentine's act for Kokomo, Indiana Fair and to the McLean County Fair in Bloomington, Illinois, and then for the Valentines at the Converse, Indiana Fair."<sup>37</sup>

Fred and Bill worked together for the F. E. Gooding Amusements in mid-September in Cincinnati for the 88<sup>th</sup> Annual Victory-themed Greater Cincinnati and Carthage Fair,<sup>38</sup> and by mid-October, they played at the 1<sup>st</sup> Annual International Thrill Circus in Cleveland with the Firemen's Relief and Pension Fund as the sponsor at the stadium. Tom Packs produced. The flying acts were the Siegrists, Fred, and Roy's act. Bloomingtonian Leo Hamilton was the announcer. They closed the season in Houston for the Arabia Shrine Circus at the Sam Houston Coliseum.<sup>39</sup>

In January 1943, Roy had the Romas at Cleveland's Shrine Circus for Orrin Davenport. Others on the program were the Wallendas, the Flying Harolds and the Flying Behees, Ethel D'Arcy, Pallenberg's bears, and Emmett Kelly.<sup>40</sup> The show was called the International Thrill Circus, and this time Fred performed with the Romas. By mid-March, the Romas were at the St. Paul Shrine Circus, followed by the Lansing Shrine Circus for Orrin Davenport. Soon after this, Roy wrote *Billboard* to report that the act had signed for a 30 week run of fairs.

That run opened April 23<sup>rd</sup> with the Larry Sunbrock



Circus in New York City at 50<sup>th</sup> Street, near 7<sup>th</sup> Ave.<sup>41</sup> At the end of April, they were in Middletown, Connecticut for the Coleman Brothers Shows, with Al Martin as the booking agent. The May 1<sup>st</sup> *Billboard* had an article about Larry Sunbrock hitting snags. "Sunbrock is being kept busy making explanations to performers with contracts who have descended upon him at the Astor Hotel to find out what's what. For instance, Jack Hamilton (the Great Knoll) and Roy Valentine, of the Flying Romas, who also hold contracts, arrived to determine what's going on, but they came away with little information except that Sunbrock insists that he'll get under way."<sup>42</sup>

They were still with Coleman in May. In June and July they were in New York State. Members of the act were Roy, Mary, and the catcher was Hank Robbins, of Bloomington.

The July 10, 1943 *Billboard* reported, "The Flying Romas, playing dates for Al Martin, were entertained at a party in Albany by Wayne and Pat Bowers. The latter are former catcher and leaper of the act. The Romas have signed for a route of fairs beginning in late July."<sup>43</sup> They performed at the Boston Shrine Circus in August<sup>44</sup> and in early September they were at the Tri-County Fair in Northampton, Massachusetts, with the Gretonas on the high wire. October saw them at the Cleveland, Ohio Stadium Circus and in Alabama and Mississippi for the Gold Medal Shows. They closed the season November 14<sup>th</sup> at the Houston Shrine Circus.

The Valentinos opened the 1943 season with the Russell Brothers Circus in Long Beach April 19. They played California through the first part of July and then went with the new owner of the circus, Art Concello, into Oregon.

The circus performed in Washington, Idaho and by August 26<sup>th</sup>, they were in Burley, Idaho. I have all the pay stubs that Lorraine kept all those years for all three performers, and the evidence shows that they left the circus at this date. Lorraine said they didn't get along with Concello and decided to leave. Lorraine told a reporter once that they liked performing their act at fairs and Shrine circuses. They didn't like to perform with shows that moved every day because this did not allow any free time to relax. They preferred performing with

shows that lasted for a longer length of time in one place.

By mid-September, they were in El Paso, Texas for the Polack Bros. Circus at Liberty Hall. In October, they played the Will Rogers Memorial Coliseum in Fort Worth for the Polack Bros. Circus.<sup>45</sup> November 18<sup>th</sup>, they opened in Peoria, Illinois for the Shrine Circus and the article in the *Peoria Journal Star* made a nice reference, "Bloomington's own Flying Valentinos." Also on the program were Pallenberg's Bears, Aerialetta, Jennier's Seals, Mel Hall, and Dick Clemens with his lions and tigers, and Mona and Maryann, twin elephants presented by Mac MacDonald. They closed December 5 in Davenport, Iowa.<sup>46</sup>

A March 4, 1944 *Billboard* article says 40,000 attended the Ray Bros. Circus in Galveston at the Municipal Auditorium for the Rotary Club's 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Circus.<sup>47</sup> Fred's act



Sue Pelt, George and Lorraine Valentine on Russell Bros. Circus, California, 1943.

Author's collection



opened their season there.

From May 29 through June 6<sup>th</sup>, they performed in New Orleans with the United Nations Thrill Circus at the Pelican Baseball Stadium with Bee Kyle, Fussner and his spiral globe, the Great Blondin, and Fred and George's flying acts.<sup>48</sup>

July 2-4, saw them in St. Louis for the Moolah Shrine Circus at the Public Schools Stadium. The July 15<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* reported, "Display 18 was the Flying Valentines and the Great Valentinos, outstanding flying trapeze acts."<sup>49</sup> By mid-July Fred and George brought their flying acts to Columbus, Ohio for the First Annual Police Athletic Association at Red Bird Stadium.<sup>50</sup>

I have a 1944 Withholding Receipt (W-2) for Bill. He was living at 747 W. 21<sup>st</sup> Street in Houston and his employer was Fred Valentine. Bill's total wages were \$2,165 for the year. Fred's information said, "Fred Valentine, Original Flying Valentines, 2524 Brinkman Street, Houston."<sup>51</sup> Fred must not have paid Bill too much.

August was a busy month. August 9<sup>th</sup> Fred opened in Massillon, Ohio at Meyers Lake Park for the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Community Day Picnic, using the name the Three Flying Valentines – and they were all men, according to a *Massillon Independent* article.<sup>52</sup> The August 12<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* had the headline, "149,678 attend Packs Pittsburgh Show. Among the flying acts were the Flying Valentines and his brother George with his Flying Valentinos."<sup>53</sup>

For Labor Day week, Fred, Bill and company were in Dayton, Ohio for the 93<sup>rd</sup> Annual Montgomery County Fair. The grandstand show was booked by Ernie Young who

also booked the Valentines into the Kentucky State Fair in mid-September as well as the Montgomery County Fair. Before the twelfth month of the year, the Flying Valentines played throughout the south in places like Charleston and Columbia, South Carolina along with Savannah and Augusta, Georgia and Charlotte, North Carolina. In December they played in Kansas City for the Shrine Circus. Fred and George had their acts performing there along with the Gallagher family, Bob Atterbury wire, the Six Antaleks, perch pole, Winnie Colleano, wire, Rink Wright, balancing. Joe Lewis was in charge of Clown Alley.<sup>54</sup>

The Flying Romas started their 1944 season in January for Orrin Davenport in Grand Rapids.<sup>55</sup> From February 10 to the 26<sup>th</sup>, they played Cleveland for the Grotto Shrine Circus.<sup>56</sup> A February 26, 1944 *Billboard* article said, "The Romas are featuring the over and under passing leap with two performers blindfolded and encased in a bag."<sup>57</sup> Sounds like my mother's famous trick. Also on the program was Harold Voises' Flying Harolds.

The first week in March they were in Roanoke, Virginia for the Ed Williams' Hippodrome Circus. A report from the April 1, 1944 *Billboard* said, "En route to the St. Paul and Lansing Shrine circuses, the Flying Romas stopped off at the Polack Bros. Circus in Chicago and visited with the Flying Valentinos and Hubert Castle, of that show. Brothers Bill and Fred Valentine, of the Flying Valentines are playing dates in the South."<sup>58</sup> In a July 8, 1944 *Billboard* note they playfully said, "Freddie Freeman reports from Cole Bros. Circus, 'Roy Valentine, please note. Otto and I just played one of your favorite sauerkraut festivals and were we terrific at the gates.'"<sup>59</sup>

In late August, they were in Cincinnati at Coney Island with Zenda Malikova, high wire. A *Cincinnati Enquirer* article from August 28<sup>th</sup> stated, "Unforeseen complications due to war conditions mixed things up for the Coney management on the opening of the Victory Sky Revue. The long arm of Uncle Sam reached out and canceled the trapeze act of the Flying Romas – by inducting Roy Valentine, one of the key men of the act. The Flying Romas were replaced by the Novellas."<sup>60</sup> As far as I



Here is a photo of Lorraine in a field of flowers, in Weed, Oregon with Mount Shasta in the background that was sent to her mother, Agnes Mather. She told her to look for the snow on the mountain.

Author's collection



know, Roy did not go into the service. He would have been about 33 years old at the time. By mid-October, Roy was in Wilmington, North Carolina with R&S Amusements for the American Legion Thrill Circus. Their catcher for the act was another Bloomington guy, Francis Reiner.

On New Year's Day the Valentinos were going to be part of the YMCA's Open House in Bloomington. The December 30, 1943 *Pantagraph* reported, "The final part of the program will be composed of a flying trapeze act with Harry LaMar and George and La Rayne Valentine. Mr. LaMar was formerly with the Ringling Bros. Circus and the Valentinos completed a tour with the Russell Brothers Circus during the summer." The paper went on to acknowledge "aerial acts by the Harry LaMar Troupe, George Valentine and Mickey King and others that winter in Bloomington."<sup>61</sup>

The Valentinos' flyer, Sue Pelto, had an accident in Chicago at the Polack Brothers Circus at the Medinah Temple. A 1944 *Tribune* article said, "The blonde Miss Valentino, missed the trapeze and fell to the net and as she clung precariously to the edge, first one pin and then another folded under her, and she narrowly escaped injury."<sup>62</sup>

In mid-April, The Valentinos were at the St. Louis Police Circus with Roy and Fred's flying acts. In May, they performed in Springfield, Missouri with Ray Brothers Circus. At the end of May they performed with the United Nations Thrill Circus with Fred's flying act in New Orleans. At the end of July they were in Pittsburgh at Forbes Field for the Police Widow's Pension Fund with the Tom Packs Circus.

For two weeks in August they played one of their favorite places, Buckeye Lake Park in Ohio. They performed at 4, 8:30, and 11 P.M. Sue said in the interview with Gossard that they liked playing for 2-3 weeks at one place without

having to move. "We got spoiled. We didn't want to move every day. And, of course, when we worked fairs, we would just be 3-4 days in one spot." They closed their season in Kansas City for the Shrine Circus, ending December 10<sup>th</sup> and went home to Houston.<sup>63</sup>

An April 12, 1945 article in Bloomington's *Pantagraph* shows what Fred, Roy, and George were doing to open their 1945 season. "Bloomingtonians Headliners in Barnes Brothers Circus! Several Bloomington residents will be headliners when the circus opens in Chicago for a 23 day run. The show's aerial acts will be under the direction of the three Valentine brothers, George, Fred and Roy, all Bloomington products."<sup>64</sup>

Fred and George performed together again through late June, July, and August. June 18-23 they were in Pittsburgh performing for thousands in the talent-packed Tom Packs Police Thrill Circus. "No circus would be complete without the flying trapeze, and the police show has two of the best – the Valentines and the Valentinos."<sup>65</sup> The next week found them in McKeesport, Pennsylvania for the Wallace-Gordon Circus and Wild West Show with Buck Steele and his Liberty horses.<sup>66</sup> By mid-August they were the free attraction on the midway of the Ozark Empire Fair in Springfield, Missouri.<sup>67</sup>

I believe this was the first year for Bill's new flying act, the Flying LaVals. Bill was the catcher, Carl Leake and Frances Estes were the leapers. In July, they were with the Regal Expo Show and in Franklin, Kentucky, and Carl Leake and Lula Mae Rudd were married.<sup>68</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Roy opened his 1945 season with George and Fred in Chicago for Barnes Brothers Circus. In May, Roy and his troupe were in Detroit for the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual



Mode of transportation for the Valentinos. Roseland Park, Canandaigua, New York, 1940.

Author's collection



Barnes Bros. Circus and unfortunately, trouble found many of the performers there. "Several minor accidents have occurred. The Great Bruffee, The Man Who Hangs Himself, suffered severe rope burns on his neck and shoulder but went on with his act. Roy Valentine injured a shoulder when he dropped into the net at the end of the act, but didn't miss a show. Mary Valentine, of the Romas flying act, fell into the net after a miss and was taken to the Providence Hospital with possible internal injuries."<sup>69</sup> In fact, Mary was hurt so badly that she "was replaced by Peggy Shepard, daughter of Frank Shepard, who was hurt recently doing a heel-to-toe catch with the Ringling Show."<sup>70</sup>

The Flying Romas were back in action in Detroit's Edgewater Park over Labor Day Weekend and they performed with Bill's act in Florence at the North Alabama State Fair shortly after that. Starting September 17, 1945, they played the Tennessee Valley Fair in Lawrenceburg.

An October 20, 1945 *Billboard* note said, "Roy G. Valentine types a hasty note to emphasize the fact the Flying Romas would complete their tour of Mexico and Central America in time to fulfill Shrine dates in the spring." Their hectic schedule continued. The Flying Romas had their photo in the Dothan, Alabama Eagle October 25 as they were playing at the Greater Houston County Fair. By late October, they were in Panama City, Florida with the Johnny Jones Expo Show with Bennie Gibson as their catcher. And in November, the Flying Romas did as Roy foretold – went for six weeks with the Gran Circo Atayde Hermanos in Mexico City and then on to Central and South America.

The Valentinos opened their 1945 season in February at Galveston, Texas with the Ray Bros. Circus for the Rotary Club. By March, they were with the Hamid-Morton Cir-

cus in Kansas City for the Police Benefit Association with Alfred Court and Pallenberg's Bears. From there they went back to Omaha for Rink Wright's Tangier Shrine Circus. Mid-June found them playing with Fred's act in Pittsburgh at Forbes Field for the Tom Packs Police Thrill Circus.<sup>71</sup>

Fred's and George's acts worked together in St. Louis the first week in July for the Moolah Temple Shrine Circus. They also joined up in Columbus, Ohio and Nashville. They closed their season in late November in Portland, Maine for Frank Wirth at the Expo Hall for the Elks' Club Circus.

Fred's 1946 season opened in February with the Harry Craig Shows<sup>72</sup> which had ten rides and seven shows, and featured the Original Flying Valentines. In April, they were back in Chicago for the Barnes Circus. The *Billboard* article reviewed the performance: "The flying return display brought on the Flying Hartzels, Bobby Fisher and his Fearless Flyers and the Flying Valentines. Routines were carefully worked out, and the Hartzels delivered despite the fact Johnny had been rushed to a hospital for an emergency appendectomy and Hank Robbins, of Bloomington, Illinois, was substituting as catcher for the act."<sup>73</sup>

From Harry Craig, the Flying Valentines went to the Central States Shows performing there as the free act. They followed this up by going to Lincoln's Capitol Beach, where they did two shows – at 4 and 9 P.M. An advertisement for Capitol Beach stated "Swim for health in delightful Pure Salt Water." You could ride, skate, dance, picnic and swim. Wouldn't it be nice to have places like that again? The Georgia State Fair in Macon had acts directed by Gus Sun, Jr.<sup>74</sup> The Valentines closed their season December 14<sup>th</sup> in Fredericksburg, Texas.

An ad in the Tucson Daily Citizen for February 14,



Car, trailer and truck of the Valentinos. Whitesville, West Virginia, 1942. Notice George putting up awning, and Lorraine's pansy box on the front of the trailer, as she noted on back of the photo.

Author's collection





*The Flying Romas: Wayne Bowers, Roy Valentine, Pat Bowers, Mary Valentine – note home base of Dakota City, Nebraska.*

Author's collection

1946 stated the Folk's Celebration Shows was opening on the 16<sup>th</sup> for nine days and featured twelve rides and eight shows. The Circus free act was the Flying LaVals with two men and one girl, presented at 9:30 P.M. The act included Bill, Carl Leake and Betty York. The August 31<sup>st</sup> *Billboard* had a want-ad for the Regal Exposition Shows and it said, "Featuring the Flying LaVals. Bill Valentine wants Woman Leaper."

An August 31 *Billboard* article said of the act, "Jeep Milam gradually recovering from injuries suffered last winter joined in Cookeville, Tennessee. Other members of the act are Carl Leake, Bill Sr. and Billy Jr. Valentine."

The November 16<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* stated, "The Flying LaVals are going to Houston. Carl Leake, a boy in the act, has recovered from his injury and is residing in Houston. Fred Valentine, Bill's brother, has acted as fill-in for Carl and will close the season with the LaVals."<sup>75</sup>

The Flying Romas opened February 11, 1946 in Shreveport for the Junior Chamber of Commerce's Hippodrome

Thrill Circus for E.N. Williams. An article in the March 2, 1945 *Billboard* detailed Roy's injury in Shreveport on February 13 saying, "He fell to the floor when the platform on which he was standing gave way. He sustained a broken hand and face and body bruises. The act was presented the remainder of the week by Mary Romas and Pat and Charles Wayne. Miss Maree presented a web number." Let's guess that Miss Maree was Mary. About a month later another *Billboard* article said that Roy had recovered from his accident and was playing in Baton Rouge with the Ray Bros. Indoors Circus at the Coliseum.

The Flying Romas was now comprised of Wayne Bowers, catcher, and Pat Bowers, Roy and Mary as leapers and they played for the Wonder City Shows in Louisiana, Mississippi and Arkansas. May found them at Edgewater Park in Detroit, State Fair Park in Milwaukee, Summit Beach Park in Akron and Warner Park in Chattanooga.

Roy's ads were fantastic in detail and often included photos like the one he had in the May 18<sup>th</sup> issue of *Billboard*. "The Flying Romas – Thrills on the Wing – featuring blindfolded passing leap and girls doing actual double somersaults. Also special publicity producing stunts." I wonder what those were. Another advertisement stated, "The Flying Romas – America's Ace Exponents of Aerialistic Acrobatics – featuring Miss Mary Romas – positively the only girl flyer successfully accomplishing double cutaway, actual wrist caught double somersault, blindfolded or otherwise. Two people blindfolded under and over passing leap."

In July, they were at Wrigley Field in Chicago for Larry Sunbrock's Rodeo where they performed with Malikova, hire wire, Arturo Konyot's comedy drunk horse act, and Alex and Dorita Konyot.<sup>76</sup>

Again, Roy placed ads in the August 24, 1946 *Billboard* reminding potential employers they were available for fairs in October and November. Again, he had placed two photos one of them flying and another of Roy, Mary and their catcher, Francis Reiner. The ads seemed to work as they played the Ararat Shrine Circus in Kansas City in late October with Wayne Larey's Flying Comets. The producer was Ernie Young and acts also included Terrell Jacobs' wild animals, Ethel D'Arcy, aerial with iron jaw slide, Leo Gasca, low wire, Dorita and Alex Konyot, the Ervings, teeterboard, and Walter Jennier and his seal, Buddy.<sup>77</sup>

Roy turned once again to the *Billboard* on November 30, this time asking, "Catcher Wanted for Nationally known Flying return act. Good indoor season and guarantee 40 week outdoor season. Good treatment, best of salary. Write the Flying Romas, 112 E. Harding Blvd., San Antonio."





Top, photo of Fred flying and written on the back says St. Louis, July 1947. Bottom, another photo of Fred doing a swan dive to the net, dated September 6, 1947, LeRoy, Illinois.

Both photos are marked Ken-Way Photos of Bloomington

The Romas closed their season in early December in New Orleans for a week's stand with the Jerusalem Temple's Shrine Circus for Tom Packs. Also performing were the Flying Concellos, Clyde Beatty and his wife Harriett, La Tosca, Sonny Moore's Dogs and the Hollywood Sky Revue. The Flying Romas closed their season late December in Chicago with the International Circus.

George, Lorraine, and Sue were in St. Louis in late April and May for the 1946 Frank Wirth Police Circus with the Ward-Bell flyers. A review of the circus was in the April 27 *Billboard* and they had this to say about the flying acts: "Flyers Sell It – the Ward Bell and the Flying Valentino troupes got together on their timing to offer an excellent aerial number. The Flyers timing their moves so that each feat could be followed with a minimum of neck-twisting,

and they finished with an over and under together."<sup>78</sup>

Also on the program was Miss Bernice, "who has thrilled patrons the world over with her daring high aerial act."<sup>79</sup> Since that was Lorraine's middle name, I'm guessing that she was maybe performing a web number. I bet that made Lorraine laugh!

August 3<sup>rd</sup> saw the Valentino trio in Detroit for the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Police Field Day Celebration at the University of Detroit Stadium. The week of November 11<sup>th</sup>, they played the Rochester, New York Damascus Temple Shrine Circus for Orrin Davenport, at the State Armory. Don Francisco wrote to the *Billboard* on November 30<sup>th</sup>, "The Valentino flying act is the best we've seen in a long time." Also performing were Dick Clemens, cat act; Eva May Lewis, Ruby Haag, Walter Jennier's Seals, and Dorita Konyot.



For the week of November 25<sup>th</sup>, and closing the season, they were in Evansville for the Hadi Shrine Circus at the Coliseum. At a luncheon, George and Ernie Wiswell were made honorary members of the Hadi Temple.<sup>80</sup>

Fred and George opened the 1947 season in Springfield, Ohio with the Eagles Circus, March 2<sup>nd</sup>. A March 15 *Billboard* note says they closed for two weeks to reorganize the program. April found Fred and his troupe in Columbus for the Grotto Shrine Circus while the end of May brought them to New York City with the Roy Rogers Thrill Circus where, not unexpectedly, every child who got an advance ticket was rewarded with an autographed photo of Roy and his horse, Trigger.<sup>81</sup>

The August 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Franklin, Pennsylvania News Herald had their flying act photo with the headline, "Flying Valentines at Grove Fair Next Week." Written on the photo were the words, "Blindfolded and encased in a sack." Fred must have written that – sounds like they were trying to copy Lorraine's trick! Below the photo, it reads, "The Flying Valentines, a troupe of daring and skilled flyers and leapers, who will be featured in the big free act to be given each evening next week at approximately 11 P.M. at the Rocky Grove Volunteer Firemen's 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Fair, at the Grove Fairgrounds. Passing leaps, twisters, single and double somersaults are all accomplished by the troupe with ease and grace as they soar through the air on the flying bars."<sup>82</sup>

Bill's Flying LaVals opened March 1, 1947 for the Houston Stock Show. Along with Bill in the act were Carl Leake and Betty Richardson. A March 1<sup>st</sup> *Billboard* note said "Mrs. Valentine (Doris) was hostess at a home cooked meal for visitors."<sup>83</sup> April started with Indiana towns and the Mighty Hoosier State Shows, opening in Columbus, April 9<sup>th</sup>.

From Indiana in April to Ohio in May. Specifically, the week of May 19 the sensational Flying LaVals played a free act at 8 P.M. each night the Fayetteville County Fairgrounds. Admission to the grounds was 20 cents, tax included, and children under 12 were charged just 9 cents. All rides are 15 cents to all on Saturday from 1-5 p.m.

During the summer, they continued entertaining crowds in Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. By September, they were in Illinois with the Wonder Bros. Circus at the Ogle County Fair in Oregon. The last week in October, Bill's troupe was in Abbeville, South Carolina with the New Regal Shows at the downtown lot, sponsored by the Girl Scouts. A November 8<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* article said, "The Flying LaVals are holding the crowds nightly, and going over well. Bill is Ride Superintendent and keeps everyone working

hard." Another notice in *Billboard* noted their activities and personnel in the act: "Mr. and Mrs. Bill Valentine and Betty Richardson visited King Bros. Circus in Elberton, Georgia. They enjoyed the performance and getting together with Walter Guice and others. Their act consists of Billy Glen Valentine and Betty, leapers, and Bill, Sr. catcher."<sup>84</sup> The LaVals closed their season November 29<sup>th</sup> in Hazlehurst, Georgia.

Like Roy (and so many others), Bill placed an ad in the December 13<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* which stated, "Wanted – Leapers for Flying Return Act. January opening. Year around work. Wire Flying LaVals, 947 West 21<sup>st</sup> St., Houston."

Roy's flying act opened early in January, 1947 in Chicago with the International Circus. February 10<sup>th</sup>, they were in Denver for the 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Junior Chamber of Commerce Circus at the Stockyards Stadium. Also on the program were Terrell Jacobs, wild animals, Ethel D'Arcy, Mickey King, the Zoppe Troupe and Mel Hall, bicycles.

Mary injured herself by falling from the rigging the first week of June while they were at Yankee Stadium. A Mexico, Texas article detailed the fall under the headline, "Texas Trapeze Tumbler Recovers After Fall." It continued, "Mary Valentine, 23-year-old aerial artist from San Antonio, has recovered from injuries suffered when she fell about 50 feet from a high trapeze at the Yankee Stadium rodeo-circus in New York City. The performer was executing a triple somersault in her trapeze act with her husband, Roy, when she missed her grip and fell to the ground. She landed on the back of her neck."<sup>85</sup>

*Billboard* reported the act was discontinued but by June 15<sup>th</sup>, they opened at the Polo Grounds in New York with Roy Roger's Thrill Circus.

Roy continued his *Billboard*-writing ways with this piece dated June 7, "After a successful winter of indoor dates, and a short term of dates in the tobacco fields and at cabbage festivals, the Romas will officially open the outdoor season here in New York."<sup>86</sup>

They played all the bigger towns – Columbus, Indianapolis, Louisville, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and Knoxville. The July 5, 1947 *Billboard* reported, "While playing the initial engagement of the Roy Rogers Thrill Circus at the Yankee Stadium, Roy Valentine presented his wife, Mary, with a new three-room aluminum trailer and a diamond ring on the occasion of their ninth wedding anniversary."<sup>87</sup> Labor Day week they were in Toronto for the Canadian National Expo but Mary was to suffer once again. This time it was a ruptured appendix which had her rushed to the General Hospital there for an emergency operation.<sup>88</sup>





*Jeep Milam on pedestal, Freddie performing sack double and Bill catching, May 13, 1948.*

Authors collection

The Flying Romas were back on the rigging for a week in early October for Cleveland's Hamid Morton Circus. After that Roy and Mary played the Grotto Shrine Circus in Springfield, Ohio the first week in November. A November 15<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* article brought fans and friends of the Romas up to date stating, "While visiting friends at the Roy Rogers Rodeo in Chicago recently, the Flying Romas took delivery on a new Chevrolet two-ton truck and a 1947 Buick Roadmaster sedan. The Romas completed an engagement at the Springfield, Ohio Grotto Circus and will repeat at the Ararat Shrine Circus in Kansas City. Mary Romas, who suffered a ruptured appendix Labor Day while playing the Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, has recovered and has resumed her place in the act. The Romas will take a small vacation in California this fall with friends of the Roy Rogers Rodeo, and then will return to the Mid-west for indoor dates."<sup>89</sup>

Shrine Circuses kept the Romas busy in mid-November and December. They worked in Topeka with the Clyde Bros. Circus for the Arab Shrine Temple,<sup>90</sup> then they made their way to New Orleans for the Jerusalem Shrine Temple Circus for Tom Packs<sup>91</sup> They closed the season and went into the New Year in Chicago at the Coliseum for the International Circus. Mike Malko was now with the act. The other flying act there was the Flying Harolds with Eileen, Harold, and Jack Voise.

The Valentinos opened January 27, 1947 in Cincin-

nati at the Music Hall Arena for the Eagles Circus with the Ward-Bell Troupe. An article in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* from January 30<sup>th</sup> asked, "How would you like to tie a burlap sack over your head, swing through the air 50 feet above the Music Hall Arena on a flying trapeze, let go, do a double somersault in the air – and hope that your partner catches you? That's just one of the thrilling stunts in the repertoire of the Flying Valentinos, to be seen with the Eagles' Circus twice daily this week. The troupe consists of two girls and a man, the male member of the trio being the receiving end of the combination."<sup>92</sup>

The May 17<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* said they were with the Barnes Bros. Circus in Chicago when George was hurt while pulling on a rope and was forced to withdraw the act temporarily. In October the Valentinos played Cleveland for the Hamid Morton Circus with Roy and his troupe.<sup>93</sup>

A *Pantagraph* headline for December 5<sup>th</sup> was, "Haven for Circus Folk. Caudell Stables Will Become Rehearsal Site." The article continues:

"Bloomington-Normal may once again become the mecca for circus people as it was in years past when between 200 and 250 show people made this their winter home. George Valentine announced that he has purchased from William Caudell the Happy Acres stables and eight acres of ground in Normal on Grove Street. The stables were built in March 1947.

He will convert the area and the building into a training





Roy, Jeep Milam, Mike Malko and Mary Valentine were the Flying Romas in 1948 – note home base is now Bloomington.

Author's collection

ground and rest center for show people. It will be known as George Valentine's Circus Haven. The stables will be taken out to allow acts to train under the roof. One end will be for trapeze performers, the other will have a ring for regular sawdust ring act practice. The middle of the barn will have a raised state where platform acts with ponies and dogs can be rehearsed. Farther south of the main building will be a parking area for trailers. The Valentinos will live at Circus Haven. George broke into the flying act work with Harry LaMar, who still works at it and lives in Bloomington. Clyde Noble, a former aerialist, will assist Mr. Valentine on the project.<sup>94</sup>

Fred opened the 1948 season with Clyde Bros. Circus at the Auditorium in Oklahoma City in February. At the end of the month they were added to the regular line-up in Abilene at the Rose Fieldhouse at Hardin Simmons University for the Optimist Club. The Frank Wirth's Shrine Circus opened March 29<sup>th</sup> in Syracuse for a 10-day run at the Armory and Fred's troupe was with it.<sup>95</sup>

The Valentines and the Romas performed together

once again beginning April 16<sup>th</sup> in Chicago for the Barnes Bros. Circus at the Chicago Stadium.<sup>96</sup> Some of the acts performing with them were Zacchini's cannon, Aida, Girl in the Moon, Terrell Jacobs, Elly Ardely, the Lang Troupe, teeterboard, and the Zacchini's flying act. Once again, the circus had three flying acts performing.

A May *Billboard* note reported that Lowell Sherer, of Bloomington, was with Fred's flying act and Lowell's wife, Mary, was with the Billy Ward Troupe of flyers. Don Northdorf was also with the act, and Mary joined after she and Lowell were married. A *Detroit Free Press* article of August 18, 1948 mentioned, "Complimentary outdoor entertainment for this week only at Edgewater Park is presented by a male trio, the Flying Valentines. The men are members of a family of aerial performers appearing throughout the country as the Flying Valentines and the Flying Romas. They appear twice nightly."<sup>97</sup> After Detroit, they performed in St. Louis for the Tom Packs Circus and in Yazoo City, Mississippi for the E. R. Braly Circus for the Livestock Expo.<sup>98</sup> They also performed in Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and closed the season in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee.

Bill's Flying LaVals were in Austin, Indiana the first week of May 1948. There was a huge article in the Winona, Minnesota newspaper dated June 21, which stated that the Ward Bros. Shrine Circus was attended the day before by a near sellout crowd. Terrell Jacobs performed with his lions and tigers, and Walter Jennier and Buddy were well liked by the crowd. "The crowd liked the Flying LaVals, too. The trapeze artists featured 11-year-old Junior LaVal who sailed through the air with the greatest of ease and otherwise looked the part of the daring young man."<sup>99</sup>

In September, they were the featured part of the Labor Day attractions at the Idle Hour Park in Phenix City, Alabama which packed in a record 89,000 attendees.<sup>100</sup> In the fall, they worked for Clyde Bros. Circus. The act included Bill, Billy Glen, Del Graham and a girl flyer. (Del is the person who later taught David and Ricky Nelson to fly.) They played Chicago November 6<sup>th</sup> with the same circus.

The Romas joined the American Midway Carnival in late February 1948 as their Free Act and in March, Roy and Mary were in Wichita for the Hamid Morton Police Circus with another flying act, the Flying Hartzells. They played the Kansas City Police Circus, and at the end of March they were in Buffalo for the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Hamid Morton Shrine Circus at the Memorial Auditorium with Roberto Zacchini, the Theron's, Slivers Johnson, comedy car, Canestrelli Family, ladders, La Tosca, bounding rope and James Cole, elephants.<sup>101</sup>



For two weeks in mid-April, the Romas played in Chicago for the Barnes Bros. Circus, along with Fred's act. June 11<sup>th</sup> they opened at the Montreal Amateur Athletic Assn. at the Royal Stadium with the George Hamid Police Circus. The July 3rd *Billboard* reported, "The laugh of the week came when the French announcer introduced the Flying Romas as the Flying Bloomers. Michael Kocuik (Malko) and June Malcolm were married in Montreal. Mike is the catcher for the Flying Romas and June is a member of the California Queens."<sup>102</sup>

The Romas opened August 1<sup>st</sup> for a week in Shade Gap, Pennsylvania for the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Picnic at Harper's Park. Mike Malko and Billy Ward were with them. A big newspaper article, from the Huntingdon, Pennsylvania's *Daily News* on August 6<sup>th</sup>, interviewed Roy. "The Flying Romas who have been putting on a perfectly timed and highly complicated trapeze act the past few nights also come from a long line of troupers. Roy Valentine began in the business when he was nine years old, but his wife Mary started when only four. Working with them are Milan Kocuik and his brother Billy." Isn't it funny how names change through the years? Milan is really Mike and Billy Ward isn't his brother.

The article continues:

"One thing Roy is afraid of is jealousy and anger, and he speaks of them as greater dangers than faulty equipment. 'The four of us in the troupe have to be on the best of terms, for the least friction among us would lead to faulty timing and imperfect control – or serious or fatal accidents,' he stressed. It was Roy who asserted that most of the accidents occur when working, 'when we try too hard.' He

said they are rarely hurt during practice periods. Seldom nervous during working hours, Roy confessed that 'usually on first nights I get a little nervous when we're testing newly-erected rigging.'

Ever since a performance in Toronto in 1939, the Valentines have used a net, and make a new one each year. 'During that engagement we were working inside and 53 feet above the floor and we were not using a net. Something happened to our timing and I saw my wife plunge to the concrete floor.' [I believe this might have been when they were performing their double trapeze act as the Aerial Romas.] 'I was left up there with no way of getting down.' He desperately wanted to get to his wife, and had to climb the rigging to the ceiling, cross the rafters on the ceiling, and reach the floor by climbing down wall supports. His wife was taken to the hospital with a broken back and pelvis bone. Roy claims that even a net is dangerous, and can cause broken bones if one doesn't fall properly. Roy, whose home is in Bloomington, Illinois, works about 40 weeks out of the year."<sup>103</sup>

I know my Uncle Roy was known to exaggerate a little bit throughout his life – this leaves one to wonder where the ladder was for him to climb down.

August saw the Flying Romas performing at the Olympic Park in Irvington, New Jersey. From there they went to the Coney Island Park in Cincinnati for the Sky Revue and Firework's Carnival with Les Kimris and Betty and Benny Fox, performing at 4 and 9 P.M. A photo of Roy and Mary flying was in the Greenfield, Indiana *Daily Reporter* that day. The article stated, "The Flying Romas promise to set the nerves of their audiences tingling with their daring routines, somersaults in mid-air, death-defying leaps and many other exciting stunts."<sup>104</sup>

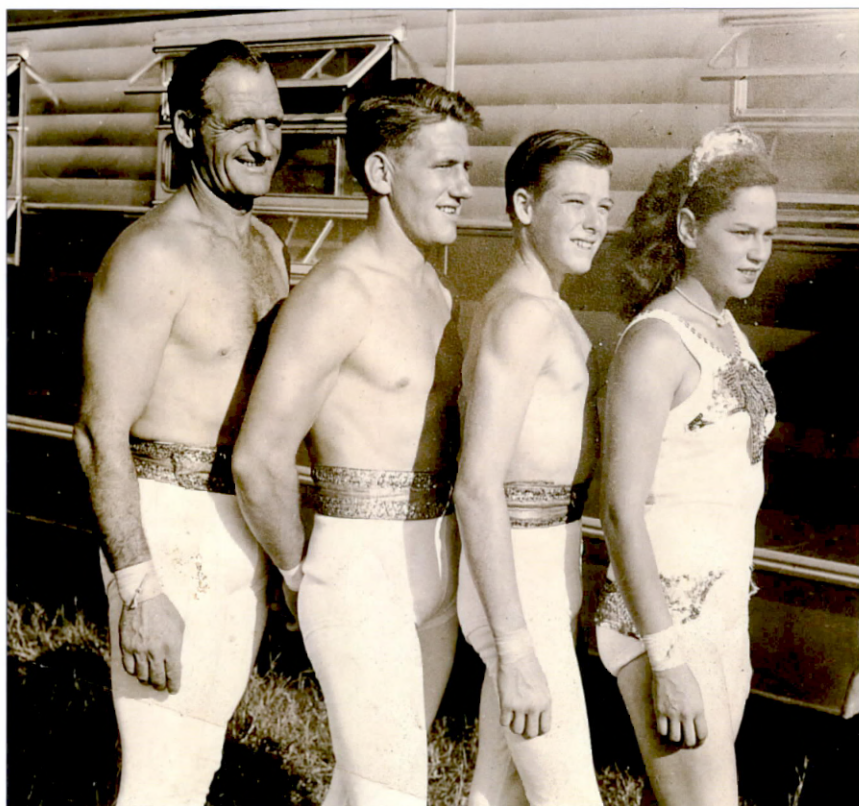
Early fall, 1948 kept Roy and his company moving. They were in Philadelphia September 25, 1948 for Hamid-Morton's LuLu Shrine Circus at the Arena and then made their way to Toronto by mid-October. Notes to *Billboard* filled the gap. "George Hubler joined Roy Valentine for an aerial bar act with the show. Hubler recently visited in Bloomington, Illinois with George Valentine, Mickey



An aerial view of George's Barn and acreage for his proposed Circus Haven. Notice the little house on the right by the treeline. Sue lived in it.

Author's collection





*The LaVals, featuring their 13-year-old aerialist, Slick. Pictured: Bill, Billy Glen, Slick and Ginny.*

Author's collection

King, and Walter Harrod.”<sup>105</sup> The program was heavy in aerial acts: The Four Valentines, the Flying Romas, and the Flying Wards.

George Hubler described the Toronto act, “Laugh of the show includes Mike Malko’s abdominal gyrations in the Aerial Royals bar act. The latter now closely rivals Valentine’s flyover shirt for top honors on the yock registering machines. Joining here were the Flying Wards, with Billy Ward, Mickey King, leaping, and Jimmy Olson, catching. Looking pert these days is Mary Romas Valentine.” The next week he mentioned that Mike Malko and Jeep Milam were members of Roy’s aerial bar act.

A Wilkes-Barre October 16<sup>th</sup> *Times-Leader* article stated the Hamid Morton Circus was coming to Kingston October 25<sup>th</sup> for the Irem Temple at the Armory. Acts included the Flying Romas, The Theronas, 7 bicyclists, Ira Wakins’s chimps, Capt. Dick Clemens’ lions, Roland Tiebor’s seals, the Four Valentine’s, aerial bar act, and Hip Raymond with his small comedy car. The October 20<sup>th</sup> issue of the same paper had a large photo of the Romas with Roy, Mary, Mike Malko, and a man in clown make-up and a checkered suit. This could be Billy Ward. The shows were at 3 and 8:15 daily.

In early November, they performed at the National Guard Armory in Troy, New York. Once again George Hubler wrote *Billboard*, “Aerial acts worked at a disadvantage because of low girders. Mike Malko and Roy Valentine celebrated their 27<sup>th</sup> birthdays with a joint celebration. The feast was prepared by their wives, June and Mary.”<sup>106</sup> (I think Roy lost a few years here. I believe he would have been celebrating his 36<sup>th</sup> birthday!) Hubler also noted in the October 23 *Billboard*: “Mike Malko and Jeep Milam are not only the funny men in Roy Valentine’s aerial bar act, but are noted Psychologists and men of wisdom in the dressing room.”

They closed the season in Atlanta at the Auditorium November 17<sup>th</sup> for the Hamid-Morton Circus, working as the Aerial Royals and the Flying Romas. From there, they would embark upon a vacation at home in San Antonio.<sup>107</sup>

Meanwhile back in Bloomington, the idea for George’s Circus Haven wasn’t going well. George had asked the city’s permission to open a trailer park on his property.<sup>108</sup>

There were already two other trailer camps in Normal and the council was finding fault with them. Town residents didn’t want to live near them or have their property values decreased. By February, the council was still discussing the camps, dickering about details like a license fee of \$150 per year, and how far apart the trailers should be. They kept putting off George’s request. Finally they told George that he could not set up a trailer camp, which would have meant getting electricity, city water, etc. to the site.

Throughout the years, I remember performers coming to the barn and staying on their way to the next town to perform. I think they would plug in to the electricity for a day or two, and get water. I remember Walter and Ethel Jennier staying for a few days every now and then throughout the years with their seals. I know my uncles would stop by – they put up their rigging in the large field nearby to practice before moving on.

My grade school and high school classmates remember going to the barn to watch them practice. A former next door neighbor, whose family had horses, remembers seeing Roy and his horses at the barn. It is so great to hear what they remember about the barn and the performers that would stay there. One classmate told me she remem-



bers going to the barn and my mother telling her I couldn't come out and play until I finished practicing on my trapeze. Can you imagine remembering that little memory for 60 years, at least?

The Valentinos traveled a lot of miles in 1948: To Hartford first for Frank Wirth Shrine Circus in April; to the Memphis Fairgrounds for the Disabled American Veterans Association; to Washington, DC for the Orrin Davenport Shrine Circus; to St. Louis with the Frank Wirth Circus; to Idlewild Park in Ligonier, Pennsylvania for two weeks in June; to Springfield, Illinois for the Junior Chamber of Commerce Thrill Circus; and to Houston for two weeks for the Arabia Temple Shrine Circus for Hamid-Morton. Lorraine was not with George in the flying act this time. She was at home in Bloomington, awaiting the birth of their daughter, me.

Lorraine spoke to Steve Gossard in their interview about the few months leading up to my arrival. "But what made me quit flying – I was still working at seven months – we were down in a little Southern Illinois town. We were always right on the Square, right downtown. So, we're climbing up the ladder and everybody is quiet and standing around, close, you know. Well, I just put on our wardrobe and I had made just a little half skirt, to kinda hide things. So in that little town, everybody knew what's what. So, it's so quiet and I'm climbing up and all of a sudden I heard a little kid holler, 'I know somebody that is in a family way!' Oh, I about died. So I told George, 'That's it! When a little kid knows everything, it's time to quit.' Oh, that was awful."<sup>109</sup> Lorraine said Jack Murphy filled in for her in Fort Worth and Houston. I was born December 5<sup>th</sup>, one day after George, Sue, and Jack hurried home from Fort Worth!

The week of May 5, 1949 Fred and troupe were in Lincoln, Nebraska for the Shrine Circus at the State Fairgrounds Coliseum, performing at 3:30 and 8:15 P.M. Dolly Jacobs performed with the elephants and Mel Hall had his bicycle act. By August, Fred's act was playing in Bevier, Missouri for the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Homecoming with the Hartsock Shows Carnival. During this time Fred took time to write *Billboard* to say, "The Flying Valentines have concluded a route of 10 weeks of fairs in Kansas, Nebraska and Texas for the J. C. Michaels Attractions, of Kansas City and Chicago. Fair dates included Fairbury, Deshler, Clay City, Milligan and Crete, Nebraska; Centralia, Glasco, Emporia, and Salina, Kansas, and Amarillo and La Grange, Texas."<sup>110</sup>

November 6<sup>th</sup> they started performing in Houston for Orrin Davenport's Shrine Circus. Dick Lewis reported, "We paraded on the downtown streets of Houston. Line-



*Cherie in Omaha in one of my favorite photos – at five months, 1949.*

Author's collection

up of acts this year includes the Wallendas, Hannefords, Joe Walsh, Harold Voise and Freddie Valentine, flying acts, the Shyrettos, Sonny Moore, Harry and Ruby Haag and Clown Alley included Earl Shipley, Oscar Wallenda, Happy Kellums and Joe Lewis. One visitor in Houston was Clyde Beatty. Ruth Flannigan, aerialist, suffered a severe jolt but escaped serious injury when she fell from her trap bar the other day. Corinne Dearo, while putting up her rigging, banged herself in the eye and is displaying a net shiner."<sup>111</sup> They finished their season in New Orleans in late November for the Tom Packs Circus.<sup>112</sup>





Sue Pelt and Lorraine – they used butterflies on their costumes throughout the years.

Author's collection

Bill's LaVal's 1949 season must not have started off too well, as the March 12<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* had an ad that stated, "Wanted – due to disappointment – want leaper for Flying Act. Best of treatment, good salary, long season." From May 7 to June 15, the LaVals performed in Mexico City with the El Gran Circo Español Arriola, under canvas.<sup>113</sup> Bill was the catcher and his son, Billy Glen, and Carl Leake were the leapers. Box seats were 10 pesos or \$1.45 in American money. At the end of June, they were in Long Beach, California with the Ward Bros. Shrine Circus.

Carl Leake left around this time and was replaced by Jeep Milam, of Bloomington. For the month of August, and through Labor Day week, they played the West View Park for the County Fair in Pittsburgh. The park tied in its publicity to the LaVals with Slick, their 13-year-old aerialist by running ads in the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*. Ads carried a coupon good for 4 free tickets on any ride in Kiddieland,

along with an invitation to the kiddies to come out and see Slick in action.

In mid-February 1949, Roy's troupes – the Four Royals with a comedy bar act, and the Flying Romas – were in Memphis for the Hamid-Morton Circus. February 21 they were in Milwaukee for the Hamid-Morton Shrine Circus. There was an article in the February 25<sup>th</sup> Janesville, Wisconsin *Daily Gazette* which informed its readers that Mike Romas, of Bloomington, was knocked out the previous evening as he was dropping to the net from the bar at the conclusion of the act. The props to the net collapsed sent him plummeting ten feet to the floor. After he was revived, he walked to his dressing room and then was taken to the nearby Emergency Room. He was reported to have both a cut scalp and head injuries.<sup>114</sup> Of course, Mike Romas was Mike Malko.

The March 5<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* displayed the full program lineup for Kansas City. The first display was the Aerial Romas, "America's New Comedy Aerial Bar Act," and Display 20 was The Flying Romas, "The family on the Flying Trapeze – somersaults, doubles, two and a half passing leaps and blindfolded passes in Mid-Air."

For ten days in mid-March, they performed in Wichita where Johnny Atterbury, Mary's brother, joined the troupe. The first week in April they traveled to Newark, New Jersey for the Salaam Temple Shrine Circus for Hamid-Morton at the Sussex Ave. Armory. A *Star-Ledger* article said, "Display 21 are the Flying Romas and the Flying Hartzells, and both present excellent flying and tricky mid-air passing. The Romas Troupe also uses good comedy bits. Also do Delmars – a double trapeze act."<sup>115</sup> I think this might be Roy and Mary performing. I have seen photos of Mary doing a break away in their double trapeze act.

The May 21 *Billboard* had a report from Hamid Morton in Altoona: "This building was the smallest so far. Roy Romas had to use his new aluminum outdoor uprights."

The *Cincinnati Enquirer* had a huge photo in their August 14<sup>th</sup> issue of Roy, Mary, and Mike, with a young man in clown make-up and checkered suit. Under the photo, it said, "The Flying Romas will be a feature act in the annual Coney Fireworks Carnival and Sky Revue beginning August 26<sup>th</sup>."<sup>116</sup> Perhaps the man in the checkered suit was David Behee. Another *Enquirer* article about them, this one dated August 31, explained what happened when "a guest artist, joining a Coney Island aerial act for fun and old times' sake, bounced right out of the show last night. David Behee, onetime member of the Flying Behees and pal of the Flying Romas, visited the Romas and joined them to do



clowning tricks he formerly featured in his own act."

His bounding stunts in the net got their usual laughs until he went into a back somersault and landed on his back on a tie rope on the edge of the mesh. The Romas went on with their show 35 feet aloft, but Behee couldn't respond to his cue to ascend to their level by the rope ladder. Behee went to the doctor for treatment of a dislocated left shoulder. Now an electrical engineer, he told the doctor he'd be on the job this morning."<sup>117</sup>

The Hamid-Morton Circus opened October 15<sup>th</sup> in Philadelphia at the Arena. It was reported in the October 29 *Billboard* that "Roy escaped serious injury when the net gave way. He was taken to the hospital for x-rays and exam, but was back to work the next afternoon." Roy reported in the November 13<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* that while playing at the Boston Garden he took delivery of a 1949 Lincoln Cosmopolitan Sedan. In November, they closed the season in Atlanta, Georgia at the Municipal Auditorium. The Flying Romas were headed home to San Antonio, but the article stated, "Jack Bray, who left the flying act, was traveling to the Tilden Hall Hotel in Bloomington, Illinois."<sup>118</sup>

For the 1949 season, the Valentinos opened in Chicago for the Barnes Bros. Circus at the Chicago Stadium. This was the first time since I was born that Lorraine was back flying. On the program were Terrell Jacobs, Betty & Benny Fox, the Lang Troupe, teeterboard, and the Flying Duwards and Flying Zacchinis.<sup>119</sup>

May 9<sup>th</sup>, they opened in Omaha for the Tangier Shrine Circus for Rink Wright. In the *World-Herald* newspaper is one of my favorite photos. It's of me hanging on a baby set of rings, hanging from a clothes line with Lorraine in the background. On the clothes line hangs one of my baby dresses and a pair of flying act tights. The article says, "The Shrine Indoor Circus Monday discovered that it has probably the youngest 'flier' in the circus business. She is 5-month-old Cherie Valentine, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. George Valentine, of the Flying Valentinos. 'She's been doing it since she was 3 months old,' said Mrs. Valentine, as Cherie hung casually from a crib trapeze rig on a clothes-line strung between performers trailers in the alley south of the City Auditorium."

"Cherie isn't taking part in the Valentinos' act yet, 'but she's going to be a real performer,' her mother declared proudly. The baby's favorite sport is hanging from the rig by her hands and then putting her feet over the bar. She does this only in the safety of her crib, though."<sup>120</sup> As the years went by, they returned many times to Omaha to perform, not only with the flying act, but in the early 50s with

Lorraine and Sue performing on a double trapeze as the "Valentino Sisters and Cherie." I recall that their annual circus was held around Easter, and the Shriners would always have Easter egg hunts for the circus children. I also remember having to do my homework before I could go out and play in the huge grassy area around the Auditorium.

There was a huge article, with photos, in the Bloomington *Pantagraph* on June 26, 1949. The headline, "Here's Saga of 5 More Local Ones Who Made Grade." The article, authored by Ethel Sinclair, was the second in a series of articles about local women who became professional circus performers. First was the story of Mary Enos, followed by Alice Hendryx, also known as Alicia Cornwell. She died in a fall while working at the St. Louis Coliseum while doing her iron jaw act. (It should be noted that the earlier article was about the YMCA Circus – Alicia and Lorraine performed together at a YMCA Circus when very young).

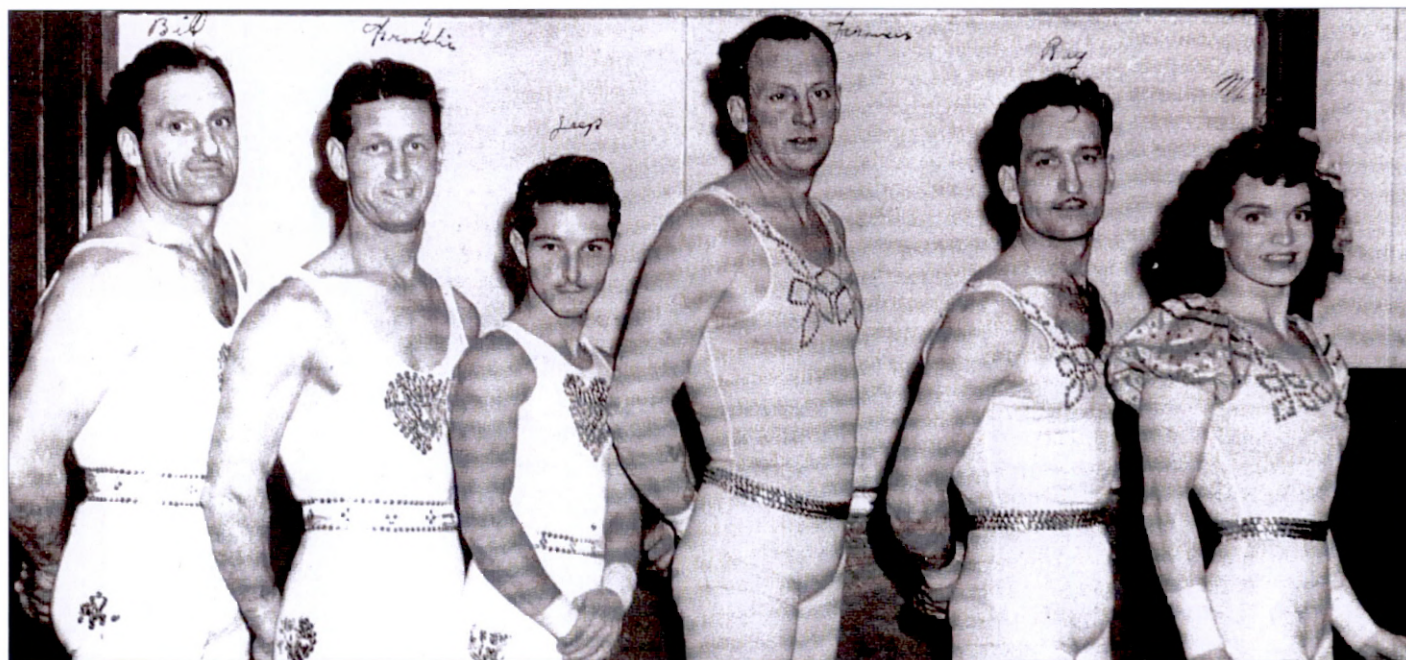
Next came information about Doris Girtin, and then it was Lorraine's turn.

"Lorraine Valentine is the former Lorraine Mather. The husband of one of her girlfriends was a flier, and Lorraine and the girl spent many evenings at the YMCA watching the aerialists practice. Lorraine was fascinated by the acts and often expressed the wish that she too could fly.

One day George Valentine, who was training a troupe at the Y expressed to Lorraine's friend the wish that he could find some girl who was enough interested in the flying business that she'd be willing to train. An introduction to Lorraine was arranged and almost immediately, the 18 year-old girl mounted the rigging and work began. It proved to be even more fun that she had anticipated and the following season, Lorraine went along with the Flying Valentinos. Her featured trick is a double somersault with her head in a burlap sack, blindfolded. George said they only use girls to do the leaping. He said a girl gets more applause for a simple trick than a man does with a difficult one."<sup>121</sup>

The last lady highlighted by the article was Sue Pelto, of the Flying Valentinos. "Fourteen years ago, the Valentinos were playing in Duluth, Minnesota. George and Lorraine had noticed the little blonde girl who came to watch them practice every day. Lorraine spoke to her and found out she was a speed skater. She hiked miles daily to keep her legs in shape, and had discovered the flyers practicing while out hiking. She wanted to try flying. Two weeks later, when they were ready to go to the next town, Sue became a member of the troupe. George said Sue always wants to practice and is one girl who really loves her work."<sup>122</sup> **Bw**





Part 2 of this article will be in the first Bandwagon of 2017 and includes this photo from the author of the LaVals, the Valentines, with Jeep Milam and Frances Reiner, and the Romas together!

## Endnotes

1. *Pantagraph*, "Visits from Texas," August 29, 1925, p. 13.
2. *Pantagraph*, "Miss Glendora Ross Married at Eureka," September 11, 1928, p. 8.
3. *Pantagraph*, "Saw Flying LaMars Perform," September 16, 1927, p. 7.
4. 1985 Lorraine-Steve interview.
5. *Rochester (NY) Democrat and Chronicle*, "Sea Breeze Outdoor Theater to Open Season," June 13, 1929, p. 13.
6. *Pantagraph*, "Circus Troupe Leaves," January 26, 1930, p. 23.
7. *The Daily Plainsman* (Huron, SD), "Throng Witness Big Show Parade," June 7, 1930, p. 1.
8. Names of towns appeared on the backs of Fred's photos.
9. *Pantagraph*, "Sees 'Columbus Tree,' Has Exciting Time in Santa Domingo," January 17, 1932, p. 15.
10. Lorraine-Gossard interview.
11. Lorraine's personal journal.
12. *The Ottawa Journal*, "Thrills and Humor Delight Audience in Grand Stand," August 22, 1933, p. 11.
13. *Pantagraph*, "Flying Valentines Are Performing in Canada," August 31, 1933, p. 17.
14. *The Hearne (TX) Democrat*, "Trapeze Artists to Thrill Hearne Public," May 24, 1935, p. 5.
15. Lorraine's scrapbook.
16. *Billboard*, November 7, 1936, p. 7.
17. *The Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, April 13, 1937, p. 3.
18. *Billboard*, December 18, 1937, p. 40.
19. *Daily Times* (Worthington, MN).
20. *Billboard*, August 27, 1938, p. 33, 98.
21. *Billboard*, September 10, 1938, p. 30.
22. Lorraine's journal.
23. Pelto-Gossard interview, 1985 (same audio interview as the one done with Lorraine and Steve).
24. *Delta Democrat-Times*, October 17, 1938, p. 9.
25. *Billboard*, November 25, 1939, p. 51.
26. Lorraine-Gossard interview.
27. *Pantagraph*, "Visiting Grandparents," July 19, 1940, p. 12.
28. Lorraine's journal.
29. Lorraine-Gossard interview.
30. Lorraine's scrapbook.
31. Lorraine Valentine Collection.
32. Lorraine-Gossard interview.
33. *Billboard*, July 25, 1942, p. 39.
34. *Billboard*, May 9, 1942, p. 38.
35. Lorraine's journal.
36. Lorraine's journal.
37. *Billboard*, September 4, 1943, p. 39, 55.
38. *Billboard*, September 25, 1943, p. 30.
39. *Billboard*, October 30, 1943, p. 38.
40. *Billboard*, January 30, p. 55.
41. *Billboard*, April 17, 1943, p. 43, 63.



42. *Billboard*, May 1, 1943, p. 3, 38.
43. *Billboard*, July 10, 1943, p. 41.
44. *Billboard*, September 11, 1943, p. 56.
45. Lorraine's journal.
46. Lorraine's journal.
47. *Billboard*, March 4, 1944, p. 42, 59.
48. *Billboard*, June 3, 1944, p. 42.
49. *Billboard*, July 15, 1944, p. 43.
50. Lorraine's journal.
51. Ancestry.com had the withholding receipt.
52. *Evening Independent*, Massillon, Ohio, p. 9.
53. *Billboard*, August 12, 1944, p. 38.
54. *Billboard*, December 16, 1944, p. 43.
55. *Billboard*, February 5, 1944, p. 40.
56. *Billboard*, January 29, 1944, p. 40.
57. *Billboard*, February 26, 1944, p. 39.
58. *Billboard*, April 1, 1944, p. 35.
59. *Billboard*, July 8, 1944, p. 40.
60. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, "Last Time Around for Coney Island," August 28, 1944, p. 16.
61. *Pantagraph*, "Two Circus Acts Featured on YM Open House Program," December 30, 1944, p. 3.
62. Lorraine's scrapbook.
63. Lorraine's journal.
64. Lorraine's collection.
65. *Pittsburgh Press*, "Thrill Follows Thrill..." June 19, 1945, p. 8.
66. *Billboard*, June 16, 1945, p. 61.
67. *Billboard*, August 25, 1945, p. 50, 53.
68. *Billboard*, August 31, 1946, p. 66.
69. *Billboard*, June 2, 1945, p. 44.
70. *Billboard*, June 9, 1945, p. 43.
71. Lorraine's journal.
72. *Billboard*, February 16, 1946, p. 86.
73. *Billboard*, May 4, 1946, p. 53.
74. *Billboard*, November 2, 1946, p. 65.
75. *Billboard*, November 16, 1946, p. 56.
76. *Billboard*, July 6, 1946, p. 70, 101.
77. *Billboard*, November 9, 1946, p. 75.
78. *Billboard*, April 27, 1946, p. 54, 67.
79. Lorraine's scrapbook.
80. Lorraine's journal.
81. *Billboard*, May 10, 1947, p. 50.
82. *News Herald* (Franklin, PA), "Flying Valentines at Grove Fair Next Week," August 2, 1947, p. 2.
83. *Billboard*, March 1, 1947, p. 55.
84. *Billboard*, November 1, 1947, p. 62.
85. *Mexia Weekly Herald*, "Texas Trapeze Tumbler Recovers after Fall," July 18, 1947, p. 10.
86. *Billboard*, June 7, 1947 p. 49.
87. *Billboard*, July 5, 1947, p. 80.
88. *Billboard*, September 10, 1947, p. 54, 86.
89. *Billboard*, November 15, 1947, p. 54.
90. *Billboard*, November 29, 1947, p. 70.
91. *Billboard*, December 27, 1947, p. 52.
92. Lorraine's collection.
93. Lorraine's journal.
94. *Pantagraph*, "Haven for Circus Folk," December 5, 1947, p. 3.
95. *Billboard*, April 10, 1948, p. 55.
96. *Billboard*, April 17, 1948, p. 53.
97. *Detroit Free Press*, "Valentines Timely at Edgewater Park," August 18, 1948, p. 18.
98. *Billboard*, September 25, 1948, p. 49.
99. *Winona Republican-Herald*, "Shrine Circus Makes Debut," June 21, 1948, p. 3.
100. *Billboard*, September 18, 1948, p. 58.
101. *Billboard*, April 10, 1948, p. 53.
102. *Billboard*, July 3, 1948, p. 63.
103. *Daily News* (Huntingdon, PA), "Begin Early," August 6, 1948, p. 16.
104. *Daily Reporter* (Greenfield, IN), "Aerial Daredevils and Fireworks..." August 27, 1948, p. 3.
105. *Billboard*, October 16, 1948, p. 68, 93.
106. *Billboard*, November 13, 1948, p. 64.
107. *Billboard*, December 11, 1948, p. 54.
108. *Pantagraph*, "Council Studies \$150 Trailer Camp License," February 3, 1948, p. 2.
109. Lorraine-Gossard interview.
110. *Billboard*, October 8, 1949, p. 57.
111. *Billboard*, November 19, 1949, p. 61.
112. *Billboard*, December 3, 1949, p. 56.
113. *Billboard*, May 14, 1949, p. 55.
114. *Janesville Daily Gazette*, "Aerial Trapeze Performer Hurt," February 25, 1949, p. 18.
115. *Billboard*, April 23, 1949, p. 69.
116. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, "Sky Review Evening..." August 14, 1949, p. 84.
117. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, "Guest Bounces High, Then Out of Show," August 31, 1949, p. 14.
118. *Billboard*, December 3, 1949, p. 57, 80.
119. Lorraine's collection.
120. Lorraine's scrapbook.
121. *Pantagraph*, "Here's Sage of 5 More..." June 26, 1949, p. 18.
122. *ibid.*





*Gordon Lillie in his Pawnee Bill persona.*

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections



# ONE OF OUR OWN: PAWNEE BILL'S LIFE AS VIEWED BY BLOOMINGTON RESIDENTS

by Eric Willey

Gordon William Lillie was born 14 February 1860 or 1861 in Bloomington, Illinois.<sup>1</sup> The son of a laborer, Lillie achieved fame as one of the great Western heroes, and became known world-wide as Pawnee Bill. While Lillie left Bloomington early in his life and only later achieved his considerable fame, and eventually retired to a privately owned ranch near Pawnee, Oklahoma, his hometown remained aware of his pedigree and followed his exploits through newspaper reports and other media. Although his early activities with fellow Western icon Buffalo Bill were largely ignored by the local press (and often fabricated by dime novel writers who considerably confused the historical record), later visits from Lillie's wild west exhibition were often described in local papers, and when (primarily in his later life) he reinforced community ties by returning to Bloomington to visit, the local press showed an enthusiasm for him as a Bloomington native who had achieved international fame but not forgotten his local roots. Overall, Lillie was an international celebrity who eventually became a beloved local figure to the Bloomington community. The present paper examines Lillie's activities and life as viewed by the residents of the town of Bloomington, Illinois, primarily through newspaper reports. Information from other sources which likely reached local residents is also provided, as is information which was excluded (either deliberately or accidentally) from the local media.

Considerable confusion exists regarding the early facts of Lillie's life. The most recent comprehensive biography of Lillie is Glenn Shirley's *Pawnee Bill: A Biography of Major Gordon W. Lillie*. Originally published in 1958, Shirley's biography contains certain information regarding Lillie's early life which is very difficult to reconcile with other sources. For example, according to Shirley, Lillie was introduced to Wyatt Earp when Earp was a peace officer in Wichita, Kansas. As Earp left Wichita for Dodge City in 1876, this would make Lillie fifteen or sixteen at the time of the meeting, and clearly preclude him from having graduated from Bloomington High as part of the class of 1879 (a date given in many other documents).<sup>2</sup> Other incidents from this time period as portrayed by Shirley appear to have been drawn more from dime novels and popular media than primary

sources. While a bibliography is provided, Shirley's work does not provide citations in the body of his text, so checking his sources is difficult. Unfortunately, as this is a work by an academic author published by a university press, many later sources drew on it in their own narratives, making it difficult to sort out the facts of Lillie's first twenty years or so of life.

## Lillie's early life in Bloomington, Illinois

While the earliest mention of Lillie in Bloomington newspapers is an 1889 article concerning his involvement with the Oklahoma land rush, as Lillie's fame grew the papers took more interest in his time spent in Bloomington as a youth.<sup>3</sup> Upon Lillie's death in 1942 George C. Root (then of Syracuse, New York) wrote the *Pantagraph* that he remembered Lillie being born "in the neighborhood of Miller Park" and "had great admiration for Pawnee Bill as a genuine pioneer and builder of the new west."<sup>4</sup> In 1940 it was said that, "Drinking warm blood from newly slaughtered beef cattle when he was a frail child in Bloomington was the thing that changed the life prospects of Pawnee Bill." Apparently Pawnee Bill told Edward Curtis of the Associated Press that "as a sickly boy in Bloomington, where he was born, he had been a pal of a butcher's son. The butcher noticed that young Lillie was frail, suggested beef blood as the remedy."<sup>5</sup> Shirley's biography, as well as a later interview with Lillie, recorded the blood drinking incident as having happened at the suggestion of a butcher in Wellington, Kansas, as a cure for a winter chill after the Lillie family left Bloomington.<sup>6</sup> The reason for this discrepancy is unclear, although it may indicate this event is part of the romanticized version of Lillie's life created after he achieved his fame.

Not all tales of Lillie's early days were so macabre. In a 1938 article detailing a robbery of Pawnee Bill's home near Pawnee City, the author (W. B. Read) mentioned that he and Lillie delivered the *Daily Leader* newspaper in their youth.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, in 1926 the local paper reminded readers that "'Pawnee Bill' Once Carried *Pantagraphs*" and noted that Lillie "started his career as a wage earner by carrying papers for the *Pantagraph* when a youth



in school.”<sup>8</sup> A previous story from 1898 told readers that Lillie “while attending the high school was also a carrier for the *Pantagraph* for about two years.”<sup>9</sup> Yet another story from 1931 mentioned that Lillie was a carrier for the *Pantagraph*, adding that in a letter to local resident Bryan Carlock Lillie stated, “I am always proud to have my name appear in the *Pantagraph* because as a boy I carried a route for this paper.”<sup>10</sup> Local news media was certainly not above reminding readers that a famous figure once delivered their product.

The same article which mentioned Lillie carried the *Pantagraph* also reported the memories of local residents of Lillie as a student at Bloomington High. Lillie was described as a student who “was good in his studies, was fairly studious, and liked to serenade the girls by playing a guitar.”<sup>11</sup> In a special alumni edition of the *Bloomington High School Aegis* (Lillie’s portion was also reprinted in the *Pantagraph* in 1942) Lillie initially related his own feelings towards his education this way: “For two months after I graduated I had little use for my education,” but then stated that eventually a day did come when he was called upon to use his education, and not only did he still have the knowledge he had acquired, but that:

my success was all due to the education I received at the old third ward school, the Bloomington high school, and a few lessons taught me at my good mother’s knee. My dear readers who are members of the Bloomington high school, I say to you, you are on the right road. Too much value cannot be put on education. And had I a family of children I would rather endow them with a good high school education than all the riches in the world.<sup>12</sup>

An earlier piece mentioned Lillie’s attendance at Bloomington high school before it segued into a report of Lillie’s dislike of Shakespeare, and preference for the history of the early west. The anonymous author stated that not only was the early west period of history interesting, but that there was a moral lesson to be drawn from it. “It is an object lesson in courage, democracy, industry, and vision. The men who won the west were ardent individualists, faithful lovers of freedom. They knew what their job was and they were willing to spend their lives on it, working and fighting to bring reality to their dreams.”<sup>13</sup> Presumably Lillie was regarded by the writer as a locally produced archetype of these virtues. Not all of the stories about Lillie were used to launch such sermons, and a 1931 list of locally relevant historical trivia simply asked residents if they remembered

“when Pawnee Bill as a boy attended the old Third Ward School?”<sup>14</sup>

Another academic adventure by Lillie that drew local interest long after it occurred was his brief stint as a teacher at a rural school near Bloomington, Illinois. A 1937 story mentioned that an “annual homecoming for the Brush College school will be held Sunday at the school, southwest of Arrowsmith [township].” While details of his time as a teacher were not fleshed out, the article did specifically mention “the famous Indian burying grounds are located near this school, where Gordon Lillie, ‘Pawnee Bill,’ was a former teacher.”<sup>15</sup> A follow-up article five days later related that during the reunion “a letter was read by Mrs. Lillis Wyckoff-Brown from an old time teacher and former resident, Gordon ‘Pawnee Bill’ Lillie.”<sup>16</sup> A third piece provided a much more dynamic account of Lillie’s brief experience at the school. Titled “Pawnee Bill Once Tamed School Boys” the article related that in 1877, a seventeen year old Lillie learned that in Brush College “the ‘big boys’ had beaten every teacher until none would take the job. The school closed.” Lillie offered to teach at the school on what was referred to as a “produce or else” contract, and after his initial call for quiet was met by students with increased noise, “He leaped from his desk, and reached for the largest student, buried both hands in his hair and jerked. The amazed youth flew over the desk and went sliding across the floor on his nose. He missed the red hot stove by inches. In quick succession two others followed.”<sup>17</sup> The incident was described by County Superintendent of Schools William B. Brigham as “Lillie was a little boy, no taller than you but about seven inches wider. He ‘subdued’ those students. Then he told them to climb back to their seats – if they could. There wasn’t any more trouble. Pawnee Bill had fun.”<sup>18</sup> In his biography of Lillie, Shirley stated that while a teacher at the Pawnee Indian School Lillie was attacked by a student who Lillie struck with a fire poker and knocked unconscious in self-defense. It is unclear if the fight in Arrowsmith may have been dramatized into this incident to accommodate other events in Shirley’s timeline.<sup>19</sup>

### The Lillie family heads west

At some point fairly soon after his experience teaching in Arrowsmith Gordon Lillie left Bloomington. Lillie’s father, Newton Lillie, had embarked for Kansas some time earlier, leaving his wife and children in Bloomington. Considerable confusion as to when exactly both Lillies left Bloomington exists (likely created by attempts to shoehorn in Gordon Lillie’s meeting Wyatt Earp and other apocry-



phal tales), but some facts may be gleaned from primary sources. On June 2, 1876 the Mayers and McPayne's Flouring Mill on South Main Street burned, and the mill was "a nearly total loss."<sup>20</sup> This was almost certainly the same mill on South Main Street later described by Louis Bibel as being owned by "Myers" [Mayers] which burned and prompted Newton Lillie to relocate to Kansas.<sup>21</sup> This puts Lillie's father in Bloomington as late as 1876. Newton Lillie's 1915 obituary also stated that the mill burned in 1876, and that Newton left for Kansas in the summer of 1878.<sup>22</sup> The land patent for Newton Lillie's property in Kansas records the land as being sold to him on October 1, 1880, although in certain parts of the country it was not uncommon for settlers to live on the land for some time before buying it from the government.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, it seems reasonably certain that Newton Lillie left for Kansas after June of 1876 at the earliest, and likely in the summer of 1878 but before October 1, 1880. As for when Gordon Lillie left Bloomington, his own Natural Philosophy and Geometry final exams are dated May 20, 1879, putting him in high school on this date.<sup>24</sup> Given these facts, it seems likely Lillie's father left for Kansas in the summer of 1878, with Lillie graduating with the class of 1879, teaching at Arrowsmith in the 1879-1880 school year, and leaving Bloomington soon after.

Lillie himself confirmed this rough timeline in a retrospective he wrote for the alumni edition of the *Bloomington High School Aegis*, stating that

I graduated in the class of '79. The year previous my father had moved to Sumner County, Kansas, which is right on the border of the Indian Territory. My mother had promised me if I worked hard so as to pass all my studies she would send me to my father in the spring, as she thought sure he would send for us all by then and in this way her promise would be kept. But when spring came my father wrote that money was scarce and he would send for us in the fall.

While dime novels had Lillie heading directly for Kansas City and wild (and sometimes violent) adventures, in this biographical sketch Lillie narrated that after making his way to the Indian Territory "The first work I did was handling a scraper on the Santa Fe Rail Ry., then I was waiter in a restaurant; then I went to trading horses with the Indians and in this way I learned the Indian language."<sup>25</sup> This timeline omits many of Lillie's early adventures as recounted by Shirley, but is consistent with other sources.

After leaving Bloomington and eventually Kansas, Lil-



May (Mary) Lillie, who married Gordon in 1886 and became a star performer.

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lie served as interpreter and secretary to United States Indian Agent Major E. H. Bowman, a position which Lillie described as getting "through the kindness of Adlai Stevenson, David Davis, M. W. Packard, and several others" (all prominent and well-known Bloomington area figures).<sup>26</sup> Based on this experience with the Pawnee language and people, Lillie joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show for the 1883 season. Lillie acted as interpreter and was generally responsible for the Pawnee Indians accompanying the show. While Lillie's motivations for joining the show at the time are not clear, Lillie stated that he "drifted into the show business."<sup>27</sup> Curiously, Lillie's sudden association with the legendary Buffalo Bill does not appear to have been remarked upon by the local press at the time.





Lillie on horseback.

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### Lillie drifts into show business

Other significant events which were apparently not remarked upon in local media were Lillie's marriage to May (full legal name "Mary") Manning, the daughter of a Quaker physician.<sup>28</sup> Lillie met May when the Wild West Show played in Philadelphia, and after a two year courtship they married in 1886. In 1888, the two of them launched Pawnee Bill's Historic Wild West, which reorganized after a financially poor first year as the Pawnee Bill's Historical Wild West Indian Museum and Encampment Show. This second, smaller show went on to financial and popular success. 1888 was also the year Pawnee Bill began to appear in dime novels such as *The Buckskin Avenger* or, *Pawnee Bill's Pledge*. Ultimately, Lillie starred in seventeen dime novels,

and appeared in many more as a supporting character to Buffalo Bill.<sup>29</sup> The wide circulation of these dime novels likely means at least some members of the Bloomington Community read these fictionalized tales of Lillie's life.

Despite these major events in Lillie's life, the first article (chronologically) in a Bloomington newspaper to mention him was a February 4, 1889 story reprinted from Caldwell, Kansas, that mentions the role of "Pawnee Bill" in the Oklahoma land rush. Lillie was a prominent figure working on behalf of the settlers in the land rush, and the article noted that both Harry Hill and Frank Albright had come to Caldwell, Kansas to ask Lillie not to move onto the land until the bill had passed the senate.<sup>30</sup> The *Pantagraph* gave no indication to readers that Lillie was originally from Bloomington.

Local papers next noted Lillie's activities on April 28, 1893 when Lillie was granted permission by the Department of the Interior to "take a squad of Indians from one of the reservations for exhibition at the world's fair." This was in reference to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, Illinois (World's Columbian Exhibition), and the article stated that "Lillie formerly lived here." This can hardly be considered an enthusiastic endorsement of Lillie's Bloomington roots, especially compared to later articles.<sup>31</sup>

Local papers made no comment at the time when Lillie took his show to Europe in 1894, but a report on Lillie's 1900 exhibition included a section titled "Lost Money in Europe." Readers were told that "Mr. Lillie stated that the venture cost him \$100,000. It was a success in every way but financial." The show itself was not described, but the financial troubles Lillie encountered were attributed to expenses such as transportation across the Atlantic, licenses which were not required in the United States, extra advertising costs, and costs being generally higher.<sup>32</sup>

After the financially disastrous European tour Lillie's 1895 show was "billed in all the eastern cities of any consequence." Foreshadowing the enthusiasm that would later be shown by the local press, the article also noted that "Pawnee Bill is Gordon Lilly [sic], a well-known Bloomington boy."<sup>33</sup> Readers were also informed that Pawnee Bill's show was being held at the fair grounds on that day, and given a brief biography of Lillie. "He graduated in the high school class of 1879, went to Kansas afterward and is now playing to big business. The show arrived this morning from Kankakee and Gordon Lillie, as he formerly was known, will be welcomed by his old friends."<sup>34</sup> This emphasis on Lillie's local roots continued to appear most strongly when he was appearing in or visiting Bloomington.



## Pawnee Bill brings his exhibition to Bloomington

Despite the enthusiasm for Lillie's return to his hometown, the exhibition itself met with disaster in the form of a sudden rainstorm. The event started off well, and "The western scenes, the robbing of the stage coach, the hanging of the horse thief, etc., were very vivid and thrilling." There was no further description of the exhibition itself, but the consequences of the sudden downpour are told in considerably more detail:

But the show was scarcely half done when it began to rain. Those less sheltered hurried away, but the band still played and the redskins whooped. It rained harder, and more people grabbed up their skirts and ran to cover, but the band still played on. The rain came down in a deluge, and more people, like drowned rats, slopped through the grass for shelter, but the band played on. And then the storm broke. The wind took the little tent over the band and sent it helter skelter over the ground and the musicians stopped playing and ran away. All this while the people in the reserved seats were standing and laughing immoderately at the antics of the poor wet creatures in their frantic efforts to get out of the rain. Women's lawn dresses hung to them like dish rags, children fell sprawling in the ponds, stalwart men came down on all fours.<sup>35</sup>

A second gust of wind collapsed the canopy onto the laughing people in the reserved seats, and there followed a description of the thorough drenching received by all present; however, "it was a good-natured crowd throughout and many declared the rain was the best part of the performance." Despite this forgiving reaction by the audience, Pawnee Bill still "packed his things up early and went to Champaign [Illinois], where it was generally hoped he would have better fortune than in his native city."<sup>36</sup> While the performance was a disaster, local goodwill towards Lillie was apparently undiminished.

In 1898 international relations with Spain caused some trouble for Lillie and his performers. A July 30, 1898 advertisement announced that Pawnee Bill's Historic Wild West would be showing in Bloomington on Thursday, August 4.<sup>37</sup> This advertisement promised a performance by Señor Francisco and his Vaqueros, but a follow-up story on August 1 announced that:

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**BLOOMINGTON**  
**THURSDAY, AUG. 4**  
**PAWNEE BILL'S**

HISTORIC

**WILD WEST**

Indian Museum, Indian Village, Hippodrome and Great Mexican



**NATURE'S OWN EXHIBITION**

Instructive and Full of Interest.

WARLIKE INDIANS, FAMOUS CHIEFS,  
BUCKING BRONCHOS.

**MAY LILLIE, CHAMPION LADY RIFLE SHOT**

Wild Western Beauties, Daring Cowboys.

**Grand HIPPODROME**

Racing Steers, Great Artillery Race, Señor Francisco and his Vaqueros, Mountain Meadow Massacre reproduced, Indians Attacking Fort Sill Stage Coach and 1,000 special features.

**WILD RIDERS OF THE PAMPAS**

GRAND STREET PARADE AT 10 A. M.

Two Grand Exhibitions Daily at 2 and 8 p. m.

Pantagraph advertisement for Lillie's show in Bloomington, Illinois on August 4, 1898, page 7.

Owing to the prejudice engendered by the war [the Spanish-American War] Pawnee Bill, the Wild West showman, was compelled to cancel his contract with the troupe of Spanish bull-fighters which were a part of the entertainment. They with-



drew at Anderson, Ind., on Friday night. They got into trouble in nearly every town the show visited, where patriotic Americans desired to take a fall out of them [lower their status or dignity] as representatives of the Spanish nation.<sup>38</sup>

On the day of the show, August 4, the paper noted that "several extra policemen were put on duty last evening in preparation for the crooks who may be following the Pawnee Bill circus." The precaution was noted as being "usual" and that some of the thieves believed to be in the area also followed the Ringling show.<sup>39</sup> Despite these difficulties, Lillie and his performers arrived to play his hometown.

*The Bloomington Daily Leader* provided a description of the morning show, noting in the first paragraph that "the performance has materially improved since it was here two years ago, and many new features have been added, including a canvas covering over all the seats." Readers were informed that "Pawnee Bill was reared in Bloomington and lived here until a young man" before going west and eventually creating a wild west show. The show was described in complimentary terms ("even the adults were aroused to enthusiasm"), and some detail. In the morning parade

There was no glitter of flashily painted wagons and chariots, there was no calliope and nothing of that sort. It was a parade made up of rough people of the plains, cowboys, Indians, Mexicans and the like, and it was just such a parade as the people wanted to see and they were delighted with it, for it was original from beginning to end, and the Bloomington people like original things.

With Pawnee Bill at the head of the parade, viewers were treated to the sight of "a battery of light artillery, while a genuine old-fashioned stage coach and prairie schooner showed the younger generations how their grandparents used to travel." Finally, it was noted that "a tally-ho coach [a coach with four horses rigged so it could be driven by a single person] was also in evidence."<sup>40</sup> The afternoon show was also generally described:

The band of Arabs is the best on the road and in every way a decided success. The military scene including maneuvers by the cavalry of six nations was heartily applauded. The "flags of all nations" display was incomplete. The Spanish flag, along with the Spaniards, was withdrawn some time ago and more recently the Austrian and German flags have been pulled down, as patriotic audiences insisted on

hissing them. The people will stand the French flag, while that of England and Cuba are received with the same sort of enthusiasm as "old glory" itself.

Additionally, May Lillie was singled out for praise, as "she now performs all the wonderful feats on horseback formerly believed to be possible to only Buffalo Bill" (no specifics are given), and the show was highly praised in general.<sup>41</sup> A very similar article in the *Bloomington Daily Bulletin* (the descriptions of the circus are nearly identical) added that "There are 300 people, 58 Indians, and 150 horses."<sup>42</sup> After the rained out 1895 show, the 1898 show was a considerable success for the Bloomington audience.

In the wake of this success, a follow-up article the next day praised the exhibition, and included a five paragraph biography of Lillie. Lillie was identified as "distinctly a Bloomington product" and the story stated (erroneously as Lillie's year of birth on census records is 1870 or 1871) that Lillie graduated at the age of sixteen from Bloomington high school in 1879. A likely apocryphal tale of Lillie spending a night during a blizzard with the Jesse James gang was also mentioned, and a summary of Lillie's career was given with particular emphasis on Lillie's role in the Oklahoma land rush. Finally, it was noted that "Pawnee Bill opened valuable lands to 70,000 families, and his name is revered in the western country." Although the time line presented is problematic, the piece was very complimentary and specifically tied Lillie to the town of Bloomington.<sup>43</sup>

A few days later an account by a man who knew Lillie as a child was printed and gave a much different version of Lillie's early career. It began by noting that during the parade Lillie stopped to shake the hand of an elderly man on the sidewalk. The man was Louis Bibel, who provided an account of Lillie's early life. According to Bibel, he served with Newton Lillie (Gordon Lillie's father) during the United States Civil War, but when Bibel arrived in Bloomington after the conflict he was unable to find housing. During his search for a residence Bibel met the elder Lillie who invited Bibel to share his home. Bibel agreed and moved into the Lillie home shortly before Gordon Lillie was born. Lillie was described as being "just like any other boy" and "no better and no worse." Bibel provided a brief history of the Lillie family:

the father went into business with a man by the name of Myers, and they conducted a mill on South Main street. The mill burned down, and in some way Myers got all the insurance, leaving Lillie with absolutely nothing. Lillie therefore concluded to try



his fortune in the west. He went first to Missouri and settled on 80 acres of land which he homesteaded.

Bibel also provided an unusual account of Gordon Lillie's journey west, stating that

Mrs. Lillie also wanted to do her part to support the family, and she applied for a place in one of the Indian schools of the west. She secured it and was employed for some time in that work. Her son Gordon had grown to boyhood, and while with his mother at the Indian school he first met and associated with the Indians.

This account is quite different from the typical accounts of Lillie's journey west, in which he left his mother and siblings behind in Bloomington and they followed later. This may also have been an error on Bibel's part, as there is no other evidence to suggest Newton Lillie went to Missouri rather than Kansas after leaving Bloomington.<sup>44</sup>

After this coverage, no further mention of Lillie occurred until a brief November 7, 1899 note that Pawnee Bill's Wild West had ended its season October 21, and was in winter quarters in Chester, Pennsylvania. The two sentence article stated in part that "the past season was a successful one and people are now being engaged for next year."<sup>45</sup>

The next year there was an advertisement which notified Bloomington citizens that Pawnee Bill's Historic Wild West was returning to Bloomington on Saturday, August 18 and promised both "10,000 seats for 10,000 people" and "500 people, 500 horses."<sup>46</sup> The account of the show given by the paper suggests this was a slight exaggeration, as it stated that "Pawnee Bill's show carries 300 people, including 40 Indians among whom are Ku-Suck-Sela, the great chief of the Kit-Ka-Kack band of the Pawnees, Spotted Tail, Bright Star, an Indian princess, and White Wolf and Stumbling Bear of the Commanche tribe. The Indians are from three tribes, the Cheyenes, Arrapahoes, and Commanches [sic]." After some discussion of the logistics of the show, including a mention of the "150 head of livestock" and "seventeen cars" which the show utilized, a lengthy paragraph described the show itself:

The performance which is given twice each day is full of entertaining features illustrating the life of the Indians when in their prime and the daring riding of the western horsemen. The Mohaje method of cremating their dead, the lassoing exhibitions of the cowboys and the crack shooting of Pawnee Bill and



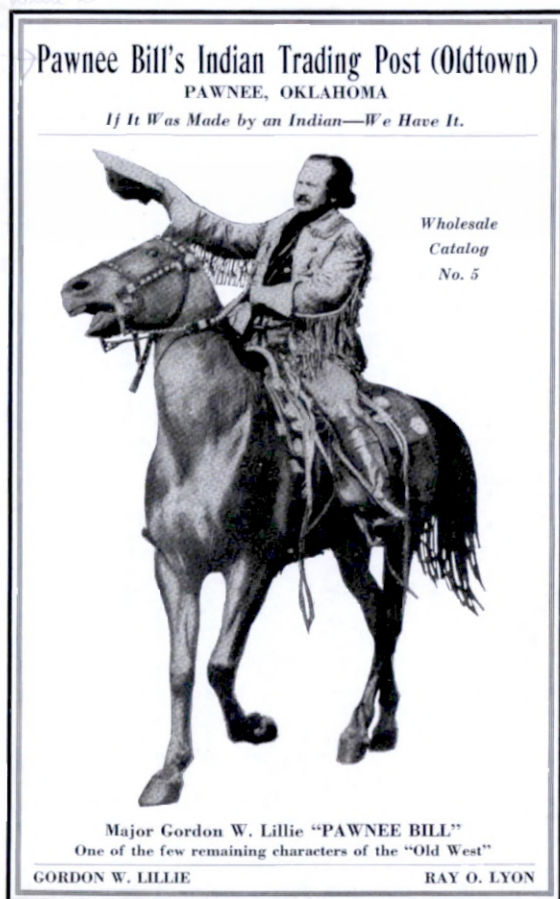
Cover of program for Lillie's 1907 show which played in Bloomington on May 21, 1907.

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his daughter, Miss May Lillie, are among the most interesting acts of the show. The bucking bronchos and the wild riding of the cowboys and Cossacks together with the Indian, the standing races and the riding by the women of the company are thrilling events and were excitedly watched by the audience. The burning of Trapper Tom's cabin and the hanging of the horse thief depicted the former rough life on the plains in a graphic manner. The street parade which passed through the business part of the city at 11 o'clock in the morning was seen by crowds and is no small part of the show.<sup>47</sup>

Following this description, several paragraphs provided a biography of Lillie, and specifically stated that "He





Cover of mail order catalog for Pawnee Bill's Trading Post.

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has been here with his show three times and on each occasion it has been well patronized. It is his native town and he cherished a warm regard for it."<sup>48</sup> Lillie continued to be held in high regard by local press, particularly when he visited.

Follow up articles brought less fortunate news, such as "Francis Forest Dolliver, a pickpocket following Pawnee Bill's show, who was arrested at Fort Dodge, Iowa, escaped from jail at that place, sawing the bars of his cell."<sup>49</sup> More unfortunate news concerning Lillie followed when a tornado struck the town of Mendota, Illinois and "Pawnee Bill's show was almost completely demolished, and a number of people were injured, but none fatally."<sup>50</sup> A week later readers were told that "Pawnee Bill (Gordon Lillie) with his Wild West show is calling crowds to Canton [Illinois] this week."<sup>51</sup> After this there was a multiple-year gap in coverage of Lillie's show. The next mention on May 21, 1907 assured readers that "Pawnee Bill's Wild West and Great Far East

Show will make its appearance at Houghton's Lake Park [Bloomington] today."<sup>52</sup> The following paragraph did not describe the show beyond saying that "The parade in the morning was the first in the order of the day's event and was well patronized. It portrayed the vanished wild west in the most realistic manner. The show itself is as interesting and exciting as ever, the added feature of the train robbery doing its part to send thrills up one's spine. The show is on its way to Chicago and gave its full number of attractions during the performance here."<sup>53</sup> The lack of detail in describing the show is unusual, and further accounts could not be located.

### Lillie combines shows with Buffalo Bill

In 1908 Pawnee Bill combined shows with Buffalo Bill, or as the *Pantagraph* headline stated, "Pawnee Bill Gets Buffalo Bill's Show." A sub-heading described the occurrence as a "Bloomington Man's Advancement," and Lillie was described as "the Bloomington man who went out west and became famous as Pawnee Bill." The article then clarified that Lillie was "to be the acting manager of the combined shows next season with Buffalo Bill in charge of the arena work."<sup>54</sup> The following year (1909) it was announced that the show would be appearing in Bloomington on July 27, and was "a truthful representation of 'broncho busting' by real cowboys and real 'bronchs.'" Other than in the name of the show, Pawnee Bill was not mentioned in this article; however, it was said that "And in a class all by himself, the last of the great scouts, the plainsman, pioneer and hero horseman, Col. Wm. F. Cody, 'Buffalo Bill,' the original and only, appears in the saddle at every performance directing and participating in every exhibit given."<sup>55</sup> On the actual day of the show it was printed that "Buffalo Bill and Pawnee Bill, will arrive early this morning and encamp on the Lake Park show grounds." The show itself was described generally for readers:

Buffalo Bill, who, despite his 64 years, is as active as he was twenty years ago. He still does his shooting act from the back of a galloping horse, and appears seven different times in the arena. The horseback football game is one of the novel features of the big aggregation. Prof. Rossi's trained elephants is another amusing feature. Capt. Devlin's Zouaves have learned new tricks, and Joe Bailey, the famous trained horse of Ray Thompson, thrills the audience with his wonderful dancing. Johnny Baker, the crack shot, is the stage manager of the show.<sup>56</sup>





*Blue Hawk Peak, Gordon and May's home in Oklahoma.*

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Lillie was not described as a performer, but was mentioned: "Major Gordon W. Lillie, 'Pawnee Bill,' who was born in Bloomington, is the general manager of the biggest tent combination in the world."<sup>57</sup> The day after the event, the *Pantagraph* ran a story titled "Great Showman Visits Home Town," which stated that "when he [Lillie] was not occupied with business he was pleasantly chatting with old-time friends and reviewing happy days spent here when he was a boy." It provided no details of Lillie's youth, except for the likely slightly inaccurate statement that Lillie "left here to make his name and fortune in the far west when about 17 years of age." Lillie stated that business was good that season, he had cut his hair so that it was "very little longer than that worn by the general run of representatives of the sterner sex," and that his agents had tried and failed to buy heavy draft horses from residents of the area.<sup>58</sup> Lillie received a considerable amount of press here, likely due to a well-attended show with no natural disasters.

### The show ends

Nineteen-thirteen was the final year of Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill's Great Far East, and the next mention of the exhibition was a brief, fatalistic note that

"Those ancient worthies, Buffalo Bill and Pawnee Bill, seem at last about to be closed out by the sheriff. It is possible that civilization can worry along without them."<sup>59</sup> Less than a month later, this prediction came true and a legal notice in the *Denver Times* gave an inventory of property from Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill's Great Far East, Combined to be sold at auction. This property consisted of

eight camels, four sacred oxen, about 208 horses, including draft horses, carriage horses, bucking bronchos, high jumpers and saddle horses, mules, oxen, ponies and other animals, circus tents, ticket wagons and other wagons, harness, saddles, one private railroad car, nine railroad sleeping cars, eleven railroad wooden flat cars, nine steel flat cars, four steel stock cars, ten wooden stock cars, one dining car, and other property too numerous to mention.<sup>60</sup>

By August 22, further legal problems made the local news as the *Pantagraph* reported that

"Buffalo Bill" started court proceedings here today charging Maj. Gordon W. Lillie, "Pawnee Bill,"



with fraud in conducting the Buffalo Bill Wild West and Far East Show. The petition alleges the Lillie failed to account for receipts aggregating \$500 for every exhibition during a part of 1912 and all performances in 1913.<sup>61</sup>

This would be the final mention of Buffalo Bill's and Lillie's show in local papers until twenty years later, when an article chiefly discussing Lillie's activities developing an old west recreation trading post stated that Lillie had "made arrangements to revive his Pawnee Bill's Wild West Show and Rodeo and take it to the World's fair at Chicago."<sup>62</sup> Lillie was not a part of the 1933 World's Fair, but around that time he did offer a wholesale catalog of merchandise from his trading post from which people could buy items such as finger bone necklaces, war clubs, and other merchandise made by, for, or occasionally purportedly from the remains of Native Americans.<sup>63</sup> While legal problems marked the end of Lillie's career as a touring showman, he continued to appear in the local press.

### Business in Oklahoma

Bloomington papers often reported on other aspects of Lillie's life, both before and after the dissolution of his touring company. An infrequent but recurring theme was Lillie's business activities in Oklahoma, where he purchased land and built a ranch. Lillie funded a water main to his ranch one mile in length, which would bring water to the residential district of the town. Lillie also loaned the city \$18,000 to build a high school, under "a low rate of interest."<sup>64</sup> Local news again noticed Lillie's financial activities when the Pawnee Bill Oil and Refining Company was established in Yale, Oklahoma.<sup>65</sup> A reprint of a *Denver Post* article discussed Lillie's home, Blue Hawk Peak, with particular praise for how Lillie ran the ranch as "not simply a background for a retired showman to continue his exploits in the 'show game' for the delectation of his friends. It is a real business place."<sup>66</sup> News of Lillie's recreation of a historic trading post at Pawnee, Oklahoma, also appeared in local papers, which described the process of building the trading post and gave a short description.<sup>67</sup> These articles identified Lillie as a former Bloomingtonian, and readers were advised that viewing his home was an "escape from monotony" as late as 1965, well after his death.<sup>68</sup> While Lillie's business activities did not generate the amount of coverage his circus career did, readers were still kept apprised.

*Did you know that*  
**PAWNEE BILL'S FRONTIER RESTAURANT**  
is serving real BUFFALO MEAT  
Dinners Every Day in the Year?

*Advertisement for Pawnee Bill's Frontier Restaurant which appeared in the catalog for Pawnee Bill's Trading Post.*

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

### Work with the buffalo

Another of Lillie's business interests which drew frequent local notice was his work with the American Buffalo. Lillie had ample opportunity to see the effects of the near extermination of the buffalo during his time with the Pawnee Indians, and in later years attempted to increase the numbers of the animals. In 1900 Lillie purchased a male buffalo from Miller Park in Bloomington, and had the animal shipped east to Philadelphia for inclusion in his show.<sup>69</sup> In 1903 the *Pantagraph* reprinted an article from the *Milwaukee Sentinel* (after adding their own remarks reminding readers of Lillie's local origins) which described Lillie's plan to build the first buffalo ranch east of the Mississippi River just north of Kenosha, Wisconsin. The reason given for the unusual location was to avoid annual bouts of "Texas fever" and that "the Indians, which have been pretty well subdued by the government troops, still pine for their feasts of buffalo and annually they make a raid on the herds."<sup>70</sup> In 1909 the local park board wrote Lillie, and asked for two head of bison to be placed in the Miller Park zoo.<sup>71</sup> While Lillie denied the request, the newspaper noted that "Pawnee Bill has always thought a great deal of his birthplace and never fails to make a trip here with his show if at all possible."<sup>72</sup> A year later the paper briefly noted that Lillie had allowed William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill) to shoot and kill "an unruly old buffalo which was mistreating the other animals" which would be "used in the barbecue feast given in honor of Buffalo Bill."<sup>73</sup> In 1917 readers were informed that Lillie had lost four buffalo to poachers, and that "Pawnee Bill, one of the famous men who went out from Bloomington to gain fame and fortune in the world, is about to suffer the loss of one of his pet institutions."<sup>74</sup> Lillie's efforts to preserve the buffalo were again described in 1924, as "'Pawnee Bill' rebelled at its [the buffalo's] ruthless slaughter and became a crusader to preserve it for posterity."<sup>75</sup> After Lillie's death, the *Pantagraph* noted that "the last curtain has fallen on the



unusual life of Col. Gordon Lillie, better known as Pawnee Bill." The article went on to state that the 34 remaining buffalo in Lillie's herd were sold at auction to individual buyers, for "about what they would bring when dressed for fresh meat."<sup>76</sup> Lillie's work with the buffalo appears to have tragically ended in nearly the same place where it began, with the unfortunate slaughter of the animals.

### Lillie and the movies

Like many of his professional entertainer contemporaries, Lillie had something of a relationship with Hollywood and the movie industry. Lillie and his buffalo herd appeared in *The Days of the Thundering Herd* (1914) and in 1927 he sued the Independent Producers company over unauthorized use of his name and life history, alleging that not only was he not paid for a series of upcoming films, but that "the proposed pictures are going to be simply terrible."<sup>77</sup> Soon after this incident, local papers reported that Lillie had agreed to appear in a motion picture show-

ing the story of Oklahoma's growth.<sup>78</sup> Legal complications with Lillie's movie endeavors continued to appear, and in 1929 Lillie was unsuccessfully sued by Lucina Bradshaw who alleged that he had made an oral contract "for \$750 a week for the writing of a motion picture scenario depicting 'Pawnee Bill's' life in the 'wild west' days of Oklahoma."<sup>79</sup> Lillie was also tied to the movie *Cimarron* (1931) by local papers. While Lillie does not appear to have been directly involved with the picture, the emphasis on the Oklahoma Land Rush in the movie was an opportunity for the *Pan-tagraph* to discuss Lillie's involvement with the Boomers.<sup>80</sup> A more direct link was reported regarding Lillie's involvement with *Out Where the West Remains*. Lillie was said to be the principal figure; however, this picture does not appear to have been made.<sup>81</sup> A final movie which never materialized was mentioned in a 1936 article on the land rush,

An 1894 poster printed by Strobridge for the Pawnee Bill Wild West.  
The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection





and stated that "the picture *Cimarron* showed the rush into Oklahoma and was said to have been historically correct, but on a much smaller scale than will be seen in a new Lillie picture, which will have the added interest of Pawnee Bill being personally in the picture."<sup>82</sup> Overall, Lillie had a fairly minimal relationship with the movie industry, but the local press found ways to mention him in articles as cinema became more popular.

### Personal and family life

In addition to his business dealings, local readers were also offered stories about Lillie's personal and family life. In 1912 the *Pantagraph* noted that "old memories and old affections brought to a sudden close the suit of Maj. Gordon W. Lillie ('Pawnee Bill') of Pawnee, for divorce from his wife, which was instituted several weeks ago."<sup>83</sup> The article does not give the circumstances of the suit, merely stating that Lillie "had been absent from home when the petition was filed. He returned a week or so ago, and at [the] sight of each other the wife and husband forgot their differences and were reunited."<sup>84</sup> The death of Newton W. Lillie (father of Gordon) was also noted by the papers, and they gave a brief biography of his life.<sup>85</sup> Other occasions were happier, such as a 1936 article that described how Lillie's golden (50<sup>th</sup>) wedding anniversary would include an Indian wedding ceremony, although no details of the ceremony were provided.<sup>86</sup> Shortly after the anniversary wedding party, a final article on Lillie's family life appeared under the very clear and concise headline, "Pawnee Bill's Wife is Dead." As the article reported, May Lillie died from injuries sustained during an automobile crash which occurred on September 13, 1936. The article noted that she was the niece of Daniel Manning, who was in the cabinet of President Grover Cleveland, and that "the Lillies had two sons, but both are dead."<sup>87</sup> This appears to be the only mention of the Lillie's children in the local press. Their first child, name unknown, died six weeks after being born in 1887 and complications from the delivery rendered May unable to have more children.<sup>88</sup> Their second child, Billy, (Gordon W. Lillie, Jr.), died in an accident at the ranch in 1925 at the age of eight. A much later report attributed his death to accidentally hanging himself while playing cowboys with a neighbor child.<sup>89</sup> Aside from the brief mention in the article which described May Lillie's death, neither of their children appears to have been mentioned in the Bloomington press at any point.

The car accident itself was not mentioned in the local press when it occurred either. Other reports indicated that Lillie was at the wheel of the automobile they were given

for their fiftieth wedding anniversary when "the car collided with one driven by Leslie Adair" near Cleveland, Oklahoma.<sup>90</sup> Cleveland Police Chief Meyer reported that in his estimation

the major could not see very well, what with the lights and the curves in the road and was on the wrong side of the oiled road without realizing it. Just before colliding with Adair's car, the major's car apparently forced another machine off the road, but the other driver whipped around a mail box and avoided a collision.<sup>91</sup>

Further details of the crash were not available in newspapers, but Leslie Adair released his claim against Lillie for \$850, and Y. C. Schooley (a passenger in Adair's vehicle) released his claim for \$650.<sup>92</sup> This seems to indicate that Lillie was considered to be primarily at fault.

While events in Lillie's personal life seldom seem to have been remarked on either during or after their occurrence by the local press (non-local papers reported on a niece who committed suicide in his home by drinking car-bolic acid, and Lillie's own possible brush with the law in New York), his returns to Bloomington were greeted with enthusiasm by the papers.<sup>93</sup>

### The Halloween parade and birthdays

Few actions in Lillie's life created more excitement in the local press than his appearance in a 1938 Halloween parade. Articles from October 28 through November 1 discussed how Lillie, at the age of 78, returned to Bloomington "to take part Monday night in the eighth annual Halloween Mardi Gras celebration."<sup>94</sup> The *Pantagraph* quoted the celebration leaders as promising a "gigantic parade" in which the "outstanding attraction will be Maj. Gordon W. Lillie, famous throughout the country as 'Pawnee Bill.'"<sup>95</sup> Lillie's return was promoted as one of the major highlights of the event, and a third article noted that "One of the outstanding events of the Mardi Gras will be the homecoming of 'Pawnee Bill'" and that "'Welcome Home' signs in store windows will greet him Monday."<sup>96</sup> This extensive promotion may have frustrated the *Pantagraph's* attempt to interview Lillie, as the next day an article with the headline "Pawnee Bill Interview Just Turns into a Reception" appeared. This article contained several quotes by Lillie, including an oft-repeated anecdote of his seeing Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill, and Texas Jack as a child, and the story of how he carried the *Pantagraph* as a youth.<sup>97</sup> By the time the actual event was written up in the newspaper the parade had



gone from being primarily “an annual affair” to serving as “a homecoming for a native son – Maj. Gordon W. ‘Pawnee Bill’ Lillie.” A picture of Lillie riding in a car during the parade was included in the same issue of the paper.<sup>98</sup> After Lillie’s death in 1942, “Taps” was played at the next annual parade in his memory.<sup>99</sup>

In his later years a similar enthusiasm was found for noting Lillie’s birthdays. His 78<sup>th</sup> birthday warranted a two paragraph mention in the paper, and after his appearance in the Halloween parade his birthday celebration was described for readers in greater detail.<sup>100</sup> In 1939, for his 79<sup>th</sup> birthday, the paper reprinted a few words from the *Pawnee Courier-Dispatch* lauding Lillie as an entertainer, and noted that the dinner (young buffalo and turkey) were “both raised on the Lillie ranch.”<sup>101</sup> Lillie invited several Bloomington residents to his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party. This fact that got local press – along with his twenty-five pound birthday cake. That warranted its own article entitled “Pawnee Bill Gets a Cake.”<sup>102</sup>

## Lillie’s death

These celebratory announcements took a somber tone when Lillie died nearly two years later on February 3, 1942. An obituary for Lillie with an accompanying picture ran under the headline “Pawnee Bill, Bloomington Native, Dies.” The story reminded readers of Lillie’s attendance at the 1938 Halloween Party, and attributed his death as ultimately caused by the same car wreck responsible for May’s own fatal injuries. Lillie’s early life and service among the Pawnee Indians, and his time as a showman was described. The description concluded with Lillie’s activities leading the Oklahoma Boomers.<sup>103</sup> A second, briefer obituary ran two days later under the headline “One of Our Own.” There was a one sentence summary of Lillie’s youth in Bloom-

An 1894 poster printed by Strobridge for the Pawnee Bill Wild West.  
The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



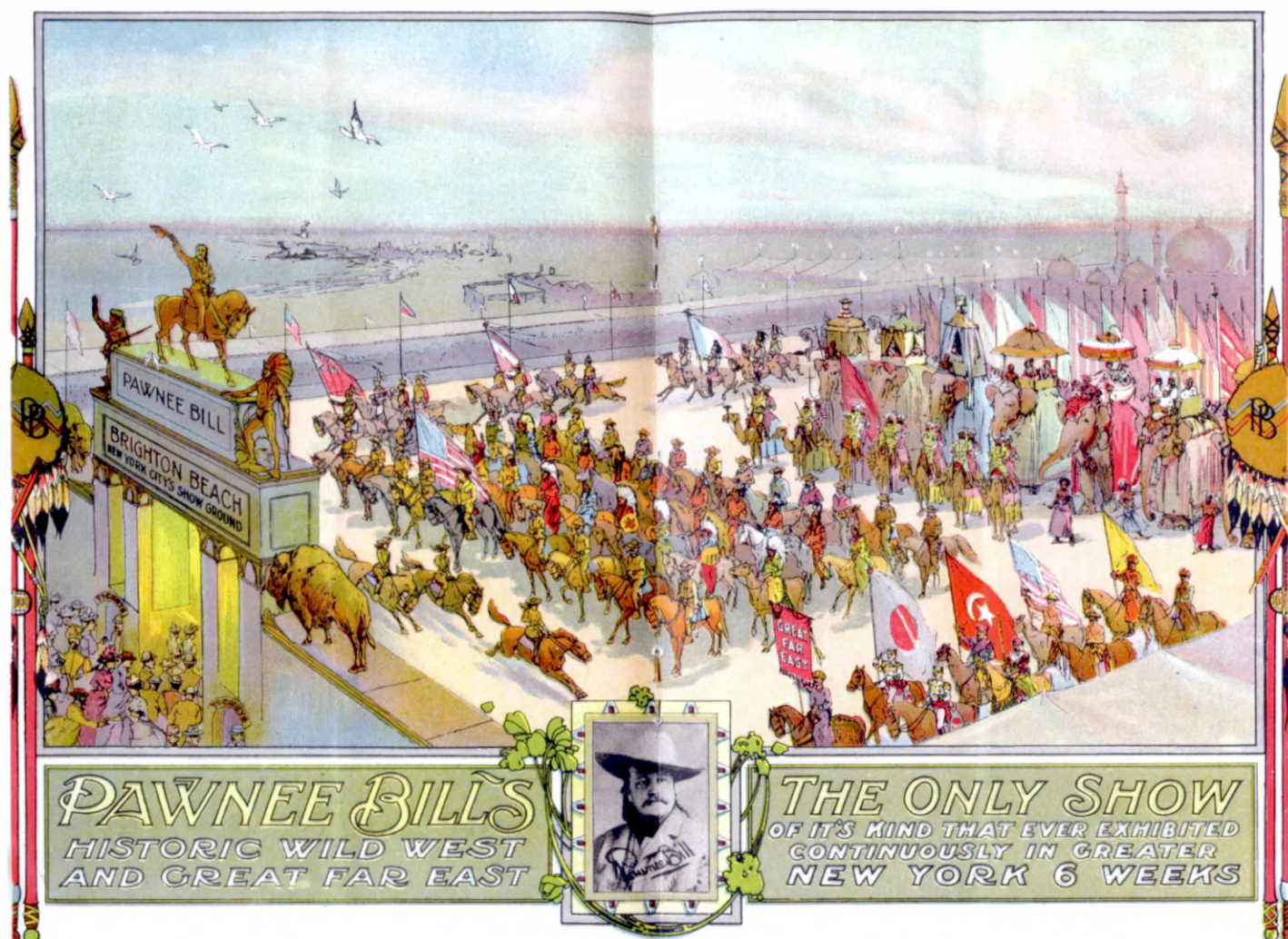




A Strobridge poster printed for the combined Buffalo Bill Wild West and Pawnee Bill Great Far East in 1909.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection





Color illustration from the program for Lillie's 1907 show.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

ington, and a paragraph which described him as "the man who became famous as plainsman, pioneer of the new west, soldier, showman, and scientist who tried to prevent extinction of the bison of the plains by cross breeding with domestic cattle." It also mentioned the car accident which killed May and its negative effects on Lillie's health, and concluded "Bloomington joins with other communities which knew him later, in according to Pawnee Bill the designation of a true American."<sup>104</sup>

While Lillie died in 1942, his name continued to appear regularly in the papers as part of "How Time Flies" and "Remember When" columns. As recently as 2009 a column describing Pawnee Bill's life was featured in the *Pantagraph*.<sup>105</sup> While Lillie's fame as a showman is what endured most, during his life the local papers largely ignored his activities with the circus, except when he came to town. They primarily wrote of Lillie as a graduate of Bloomington High School, businessman, facilitator of the Oklahoma Land Rush, and (particularly in later years) a local resident

who became famous but still maintained ties to the local community. This can be seen in the considerable enthusiasm for Lillie's return during the Halloween parade, which was not shown even when he was at the height of his fame as a showman. Near Lillie's eightieth birthday, a column by Old Newt Plumm recalled the glory days of the Wild West showmen. The article noted that, "But them are the days that ain't no more... But even so, folks can't forget the glamour and drama of the old West. The dime novel has given place to the sexy, salacious literature, but the history of the civilization that once existed on the broad plains lyin' to the west of the Mississippi will be popular for centuries to come."<sup>106</sup> While this statement may exaggerate the effect of the "sexy, salacious literature" of the 1930s on society, Bloomington continued to remember Pawnee Bill first as a man who grew up and attended their local institutions before achieving fame in the wider world, and critically maintained those ties with his home town making him, for Bloomington residents, "one of our own." **Bw**



## Endnotes

1. Gordon Lillie does not appear in the 1860 census, which was dated July 9<sup>th</sup>. Had Lillie been born the previous February, he likely would have appeared in the census enumeration. The 1870 census, and many popular works, set Lillie's birth year at 1860; however, subsequent census data puts Lillie's birth year at 1861. For example, see *FamilySearch*, United States census, 1880, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MF5G-BDD>.
2. Glenn Shirley. *Pawnee Bill: A Biography of Major Gordon W. Lillie* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1958).
3. "The Oklahoma Boomers." *Pantagraph*, February 4, 1889, page 4.
4. "Pawnee Bill Born on South Side, Says Former Resident," *Pantagraph*, February 25, 1942, page 7.
5. "Rugged at 80, Pawnee Bill Tells How Unusual Diet Helped Him as a Frail Boy," *Pantagraph*, February 12, 1940, page 5.
6. Shirley, Pawnee Bill, page 21. Edward Curtis, "Pawnee Bill, Ace Showman, Looks Back over the Trail as He Nears his 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday," *Tulsa World*, February 11, 1940 cited in Michael Wallis. *The Real Wild West: The 101 Ranch and the Creation of the American West* (Macmillan, 2000).
7. "What Do You Think About It?" *Pantagraph*, November 15, 1938, page 4.
8. "'Pawnee Bill' Once Carried *Pantagraphs*." *Pantagraph*, October 9, 1926, page 15.
9. "The Wild West." *Pantagraph*, August 5, 1898, page 7.
10. "Gives Buffalo Jones Credit." *Pantagraph*, April 5, 1931, page 25.
11. "Gives Buffalo Jones Credit." *Pantagraph*, April 5, 1931, page 25.
12. "Evolution of a Showman." *The Alumni Aegis*, June, 1906, page 152-3. Reprinted as "Pawnee Bill Reviewed Value of Studying for BHS Aegis." *Pantagraph*, February 6, 1942, page 11.
13. "Pawnee Bill, the Realist." *Pantagraph*, August 10, 1928, page 4.
14. "Do You Remember Way Back When?" *Pantagraph*, October 25, 1931, page 6.
15. "Annual School Program Planned." *Pantagraph*, September 2, 1937, page 9. Arrowsmith township is approximately 23 miles east of Bloomington, Illinois. Brush College School was a one-room school house in Arrowsmith township, McLean County, Illinois. See William B. Brigham. *The Story of McLean County and its Schools*. (Bloomington, Illinois: 1951), pages 144-5. <https://archive.org/details/storyofmcleancou00brig>
16. "Rural School Holds Reunion." *Pantagraph*, September 7, 1937, page 6. The contents of the letter are not described in the article.
17. "Pawnee Bill Once 'Tamed School Boys.'" *Pantagraph*, February 11, 1942, page 3. Lillie's first day at Brush College was also briefly described in "Pioneers Used Humor in Naming Some McLean County Schools; Pawnee Bill Tamed Brush College." *Pantagraph*, April 24, 1948, page 14.
18. "Pawnee Bill Once 'Tamed School Boys.'" *Pantagraph*, February 11, 1942, page 3.
19. Shirley, Pawnee Bill, page 73.
20. "Fire This Morning." *Pantagraph*, June 2, 1876, page 1.
21. "Rocked his Cradle." *Bloomington Daily Bulletin*, August 8, 1898, page 7.
22. "Father of 'Pawnee Bill' is Dead." *Pantagraph*, November 20, 1915, page 6.
23. United States Department of the Interior, document number 9547, accession number KS3760\_\_234, [http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/details/patent/default.aspx?accession=KS3760\\_\\_234&docClass=STA](http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/details/patent/default.aspx?accession=KS3760__234&docClass=STA)
24. University of Oklahoma, Western History Collections, Gordon William Lillie Collection, box 10, folder 5.
25. Lillie, "Evolution of a Showman," page 152.
26. "Personality Parade: McLean County." *Illinois Quest*, Volume 2, no. 1, page 37. Shirley ascribed several notable adventures to Lillie, including killing "Trigger Jim Braden" in a gun fight, and spending a night during a blizzard with the Jesse James Gang. It is beyond the scope of the current paper to determine the accuracy of these statements, but given the contradictory nature of other incidents these events should be examined critically before being accepted as fact.
27. Lillie, "Evolution of a Showman," page 152.
28. Mary often performed under the name "May," and was generally referred to by that name. For the sake of consistency, the current article refers to her as "May."
29. J. Randolph Cox. *The Dime Novel Companion: A Source Book*. Greenwood Publishing Group (2000), page 209.
30. "The Oklahoma Boomer." *Pantagraph*, February 4, 1889, page 4.
31. "Will Have Indians at the Fair." *Pantagraph*, April 28, 1893, page 5.
32. "The Wild West," *Pantagraph*, August 20, 1900, page 3.
33. "Showing in the East." *Pantagraph*, August 12, 1895, page 7.
34. "A Bloomington Productions." *Pantagraph*, August 28, 1895, page 5.
35. "Pawnee Bill: Wind and Rain Collapse His Tent and



- Thoroughly Drench Five Thousand People." *Pantagraph*, August 29, 1895, page 7.
36. "Pawnee Bill: Wind and Rain Collapse His Tent and Thoroughly Drench Five Thousand People." *Pantagraph*, August 29, 1895, page 7.
  37. "Pawnee Bill's Historic Wild West." *Pantagraph*, July 30, 1898, page 7.
  38. "Could Not Stand the Spaniards." *Pantagraph*, August 1, 1898, page 7.
  39. "Extra Police on Duty Today." *Pantagraph*, August 4, 1898, page 6.
  40. "Pawnee Bill's Performance." *Daily Leader*, August 4, 1898, page 1.
  41. "Pawnee Bill's Performance." *Daily Leader*, August 4, 1898, page 1.
  42. "Pawnee Bill's Show." *Bloomington Daily Bulletin*, August 4, 1898, page 4.
  43. "The Wild West." *Pantagraph*, August 5, 1898, page 7.
  44. "Rocked his Cradle." *Bloomington Daily Bulletin*, August 8, 1898, page 7.
  45. "Pawnee Bill's Wild West." *Pantagraph*, November 7, 1899, page 8.
  46. "Pawnee Bill's Historic Wild West." *Pantagraph*, August 17, 1900, page 7.
  47. "The Wild West." *Pantagraph*, August 20, 1900, page 3.
  48. "The Wild West." *Pantagraph*, August 20, 1900, page 3.
  49. "Francis Forest Dolliver." *Pantagraph*, October 8, 1900, page 1.
  50. "Tornado at Mendota." *Pantagraph*, October 7, 1903, page 1.
  51. "Around Home." *Pantagraph*, October 14, 1903, page 4. Canton is approximately sixty miles west of Bloomington.
  52. "Pawnee Bill's Show Today." *Pantagraph*, May 21, 1907, page 7.
  53. "Pawnee Bill Here." *Pantagraph*, May 22, 1907, page 3.
  54. "Pawnee Bill Gets Buffalo Bill's Show." *Pantagraph*, December 3, 1908, page 10.
  55. "One of the most diverting features." *Pantagraph*, July 23, 1909, page 5.
  56. "Buffalo Bill and Pawnee Bill Today." *Pantagraph*, July 27, 1909, page 3.
  57. "Buffalo Bill and Pawnee Bill Today." *Pantagraph*, July 27, 1909, page 3.
  58. "Great Showman Visits Home Town." *Pantagraph*, July 28, 1909, page 9.
  59. "Those Ancient Worthies." *Pantagraph*, July 31, 1913, page 4. This may refer to a \$66,000 suit brought against the company by the United States Printing and Lithograph Company of Cincinnati, Ohio on July 21, 1913. See United States Circuit Courts of Appeals Reports: With Key-number Annotations volume 144, 1916, page 55-56. <https://books.google.com/books?id=IXZNAQAIAAJ&pg=PA55>
  60. Notice of Publication in the *Denver Times*, 8/13/1913, Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685-2009, Bankruptcy Case Files, 1876-1948, "Petition for Ancillary Receiver in Re: Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill's Great Far East, Combined", <https://research.archives.gov/id/292720>. A complete inventory can be viewed at <https://research.archives.gov/id/292691>
  61. "Pawnee Bill is Sued." *Pantagraph*, August 22, 1913, page 7. William Cody had planned to leave the show as early as January 28, 1913, when he entered into an agreement with the Sells-Floto Shows Company to join them for the 1913 season (if an agreement with Lillie could be reached) or 1914. See Sarah J. Blackstone. *The Business of Being Buffalo Bill: Selected Letters of William F. Cody, 1879-1917*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1988, pages 105-107.
  62. "Pawnee Bill Active at 73." *Pantagraph*, June 18, 1933, page 11.
  63. Gordon W. Lillie and Ray O. Lyon. *Pawnee Bill's Indian Trading Post (Oldtown)*, Wholesale Catalog No. 5, Pawnee Bill's Indian Trading Post (Pawnee, Oklahoma, 193?).
  64. "Pawnee Bill as 'Angel.'" *Pantagraph*, August 7, 1911, page 4.
  65. "Pawnee Bill now is in Oil Game." *Pantagraph*, February 24, 1921, page 6. This article states that Lillie graduated Bloomington high school in 1889, likely a typo of 1879.
  66. "Old Plainsman Runs Big Ranch." *Pantagraph*, March 11, 1927, page 5. A portion of this article was re-printed in 1934. "Blue Hawk Peak." *Pantagraph*, December 30, 1927, page 5.
  67. "'Pawnee Bill's' Newest Project Proves of Interest to Friends." *Pantagraph*, May 4, 1930, page 25.
  68. "Escape from Monotony." *Pantagraph*, April 25, 1965, page 13.
  69. "Shipped the Buffalo." *Pantagraph*, March 20, 1900, page 5.
  70. "A Buffalo Ranch." *Pantagraph*, February 28, 1903, page 9. The land purchase does not appear to have been made, and ranch was not developed.
  71. While the American Bison is exclusively native to North America, the terms "buffalo" and "bison" are often used interchangeably to describe the animal.
  72. "Pawnee Bill Sends Letter." December 24, 1909, page 7.
  73. "While Visiting on the Buffalo Ranch," *Pantagraph*, December 23, 1910, page 10.



74. "Buffalo Herd in Danger." *Pantagraph*, March 13, 1917, page 11.
75. "Gordon Lillie, Former Bloomington Man, is Still Picturesque Figure." *Pantagraph*, April 9, 1924, page 12.
76. "Pawnee Bill's Buffalo Herd Sold at Auction." *Pantagraph*, April 2, 1944, page 3.
77. "Pawnee Bill in Movies." *Pantagraph*, September 22, 1914, page 26; "'Pawnee Bill' is on the Warpath." *Pantagraph*, January 22, 1927, page 3.
78. "Motion Picture to Show 'Pawnee Bill' in Story of Oklahoma's Growth." *Pantagraph*, July 8, 1928, page 25.
79. "'Pawnee Bill,' Sued for \$50,000, is Victor." *Pantagraph*, October 3, 1929, page 5.
80. "Deeds of Pawnee Bill, Born Here, Recalled by Movie About Oklahoma." *Pantagraph*, March 29, 1931, page 21.
81. "'Pawnee Bill' to be in Western Picture." *Pantagraph*, January 7, 1936, page 9. Lillie's only known movie credits are *In the Days of the Thundering Herd* (1914), *Mutual Weekly*, No. 132 (1917), and *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill's Far East* (1910). See [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0510394/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_nm\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0510394/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1)
82. "Pawnee Bill Soon to be 76 Years Old." February 8, 1936, page 9.
83. "Pawnee Bill and Wife Reunited." *Pantagraph*, October 17, 1912, page 15.
84. "Pawnee Bill and Wife Reunited." *Pantagraph*, October 17, 1912, page 15.
85. "Father of 'Pawnee Bill' is Dead." *Pantagraph*, November 20, 1915, page 6.
86. "Golden Wedding of Pawnee Bill Will Include Indian Ceremony." *Pantagraph*, August 30, 1936, page 5.
87. "Pawnee Bill's Wife is Dead." *Pantagraph*, September 17, 1936, page 11.
88. Shirley, Pawnee Bill, pages 116-7.
89. Shirley, 220; Find A Grave, WWW site, Gordon W. "Billy" Lillie, Jr., <http://findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=19858872>; Jay Grelen, "A Tale of Tragedy for Pawnee Bill." *The Oklahoman*, October 24, 1999 (online), <http://newsok.com/article/2672328>
90. "'Pawnee Bill,' Wild West Showman, Wife Injured," *News Journal* (Wilmington, Delaware), September 14, 1936, page 1.
91. "Pawnee Bill and His Wife Hurt in Wreck," *Miami Daily News-Record*, September 14, 1936, page 1.
92. University of Oklahoma, Western History Collections, Gordon William Lillie Collection, box 12, folder 8.
93. "Suicided." *Muskogee Times-Democrat*. 28 October 1905, page 3. Lillie's niece is identified as Edith Juda, and the article states she left a note citing her school work as her reason for committing suicide. "Pawnee Bill Decamps." *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 28, 1866, page 4. An article from 1886 states that Lillie fled to New York after assaulting Bella Levine, and that it had not been his first offense. No other mention of this incident or record could be located, and it may not be accurate.
94. "Pawnee Bill Plans to Attend Civic Halloween Festival." *Pantagraph*, October 28, 1938, page 3.
95. "Great Parade Scheduled at 7:15 P.M." *Pantagraph*, October 29, 1938, page 3.
96. "Nine Bands to March in Festive Parade." *Pantagraph*, October 30, 1938, page 3.
97. "Pawnee Bill Interview Just Turns into a Reception." *Pantagraph*, October 31, 1938, page 3. The date of Lillie's encounter with Wild Bill Hickock, Buffalo Bill, and Texas Jack (J. B. Omohundro) is often given as 1873; however, the only time *Scouts of the Plains* appeared in Bloomington was April 7, 1874 at Durley Hall. See Robert Wilson. *A History of Professional Theatre in Bloomington, Illinois From 1874 through 1896*. Illinois State University, 1967, appendix, leaf 3. J. A. Lord's Buffalo Bill Company did appear in Bloomington in Schroeder's Opera House on January 1, 1873, and this may explain the discrepancy in dates in some sources. See Ralph Duane Drexler. *A History of the Theatre in Bloomington, Illinois, From its Beginning to 1873*. Illinois State Normal University, 1963, page 129.
98. "Goblins in Their Annual Parade Bring Fun to 25,000 Spectators." *Pantagraph*, November 1, 1938, pages 3, 5.
99. "Rain Cuts Mardi Gras Crowd, But Enthusiasm High as Ever." *Pantagraph*, October 31, 1942, page 3.
100. "Pawnee Bill to Mark 78<sup>th</sup> Birthday." *Pantagraph*, February 12, 1938, page 3.
101. "Pawnee Bill Entertains on his 79<sup>th</sup> Birthday." *Pantagraph*, February 23, 1939, page 14.
102. "Pawnee Bill Sends Invitations." *Pantagraph*, February 14, 1940, page 6. "Pawnee Bill Gets a Cake." *Pantagraph*, February 20, 1940, page 12.
103. "Pawnee Bill, Bloomington Native, Dies." *Pantagraph*, February 4, 1942, page 5.
104. "One of Our Own." *Pantagraph*, February 6, 1942, page 3.
105. Bill Kemp, "Wild West Legend Pawnee Bill got Start in Bloomington." *Pantagraph*, August 2, 2009, page 15. This column also comments on the multiple contradictory versions of Lillie's early life.
106. "Famous Pawnee is Only Bill now in Circulation." *Pantagraph*, February 14, 1940, page 4.





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